

The Devil's Ace

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THE DEVIL'S AGE

CHAPTER I

"WHAT can have become of Newby?" asked Mr Clair, and looked inquiringly at the faces of his sister, Lady Panwin, his three guests, and Dorothy, his daughter and only child.

No one could answer him, for no one knew. Sir John Newby had been invited on a Saturday to Monday visit, four days previously, but had not presented himself. No replies came to a letter and a telegram, and now on Tuesday—the morning papers stated that the millionaire had vanished. The *Morning Planet*—always to the fore with sensational happenings—asserted that Sir John had left his City office at two o'clock on Saturday, without mentioning his destination, and since then had not been seen or heard of. As yet, there was no suspicion of foul play, although the journal in question hinted that Newby's name figured in Anarchistic lists—on the authority of an anonymous letter—as that of an enemy to the poor and needy. But Sir John was always so precise and methodical in his business and private relations, that the mere fact of his non-appearance for at least three days was sufficient to render those who knew him intimately extremely uneasy. Amongst these was Mr Francis Clair, of the Manor, Beltan, Essex, and he had greater cause to be anxious than most people knew, since the millionaire was his richest and most generous friend. Dives, his doings and his movements, is always worth troubling about. Not that

Clair was any more devout a worshipper of Mammon than the average man.

*This aristocratic gentleman was desperately poor and dwelt in a tumble-down old mansion, inherited from a long line of pauper ancestors. Indeed, it was said over and over again, that Clair would be wise to sell the ramshackle Manor for what it would fetch, pay his debts with the result, and settle in a small cottage, to live on the three hundred a year which represented his income. But Mr Clair was proud and obstinate, and well accustomed, as a scholar, to plain living and high thinking. It was inconceivable to him that Essex could exist unless the remaining members of its best family remained under the ancestral roof-tree. Therefore, he stuck to his ruined home, like a gallant captain to his wrecked ship, and—again like the captain—Mr Clair would have preferred death to disgrace. Of course, this is putting it strongly; but, then, Francis Clair felt strongly on the subject of his family pedigree. Like a turnip, the best part of him was underground, or, at least, in the family vault.

The dining-room, wherein the six people sat round a very ill-furnished table, was aristocratic and shabby, like its owner. Apparently, it had not been turned out, or decorated, since Georgian days; which was quite likely, since the Clairs had been paupers almost from the time that the first of them came over with William the Conqueror. The wall-paper was of a faded red, and almost hidden by family portraits in tarnished gilded frames. The Turkey carpet and the plum-coloured hangings were worn and a trifle ragged. The cumbersome sideboard and table and chairs were of a solid type long since passed away, and looked out of place in this gimcrack age. The silver displayed on the well-darned damask table-cloth was rubbed to thinness like a much-used shilling, and the glass-ware, if diamond-cut and heavy, was of an obsolete pattern. Everything in the room looked centuries old, not excepting Mr Clair and his widowed sister, who had returned home after the death of her husband to aid the keeping up of the house with her small income.

The four young people, who faced each other at

the sides of the table, presented a cheerful contrast of youth and beauty to the old lady and her ancient brother. William Minter and Wilhelmina Minter—locally known as Billy and Willy—were a bachelor pair, who chummed together in a small house at the end of Beltan village, and got a good deal of fun out of life on a united income, which amounted to one thousand pounds. They were devoted to one another, and both declared that if one married, the other would die. Willy, the spinster, was certainly sticking to her guns, in declining to hear the marriage service read; but of late she had been afraid that Billy admired Dorothy Clair too much. For this reason she had not desired to come to the Manor, but had accepted when Billy had assured her that his admiration for Dorothy was merely artistic. As Billy knew as much about art as the motor-car he and Willy shared between them, the truth of this assurance was doubtful.

Certainly Miss Clair was well worth admiration, even of the most pronounced kind. She was one of those opalescent blondes, all fire and surface emotion. To describe her as the fair one of the golden hair with sapphire eyes and a strawberry cream complexion, conveys very little of her charm. Dorothy's real attraction lay in her exuberant vitality, her almost aggressive sense of youth, which forced itself on people who were less alive.

Willy Minter was a strapping, fresh-coloured, handsome young woman, of the buxom wench order; but she seemed almost pale in the presence of the fragile Dorothy, with her overwhelming vitality and intense livingness.

The remaining member of the dinner-party thought something like this, as he looked across the table at the now demure girl. In the presence of her aunt and father, Dorothy was compelled, by reason of their antiquated views, to affect a reserve, which sat ill on her. But Percy Hallon had seen her in the open air, and away from such frigid influences, and knew well that her Quaker affectations of the present were merely surface glossings. He was as dark as she was fair, and quite as passionate in the fervour of his seven-and-twenty years. Having clear-cut features,

a rather aquiline nose, and a clean-shaven face, he represented the Roman type, energetic, masterful, imperious, yet calm and self-controlled in his strong passions.

Naturally, when a man of this nature comes into the presence of a powerfully-vitalised young woman, he obeys the law of the great Mother and falls in love. He determined to put his fortunes to the test at the very first opportunity, if only to quell the raging sea of love, which threatened to make shipwreck of his life and prospects if not soothed.

"What can have become of Newby?" asked Mr Clair once more.

"Perhaps he has gone on a secret mission connected with his African affairs," said Hallon, thoughtfully. "Sir John is a man who keeps his business very much to himself."

"You forget," croaked Lady Panwin, drawing up her thin figure, "that Sir John promised to stop here for a few days. Low as is his birth and brusque as are his manners, he would scarcely treat us so, unless the unforeseen had happened."

"Apparently the unforeseen has happened," said Billy, lightly.

"We are agreed upon that," replied Hallon, quietly. "The question is what the unforeseen can be."

"Certainly not a secret mission," said Mr Clair decisively. "Sir John usually sends his secretary on such errands."

"Perhaps in this instance he could not trust his secretary," remarked Willy Minter, who was eating an apple.

"My dear," observed Lady Panwin, raising her lorgnette, "Sir John has every confidence in his secretary, who is his twin brother Richard, his second self in looks and nature."

"They are neither of them handsome, auntie," remarked Dorothy, with a shrug; and at once Clair glanced at her severely.

"Newby is not an Adonis, certainly; nor is he a Chesterfield, much less a Romeo. He is a son of the soil," continued Mr Clair, dusting his hands as though some of the said soil adhered; "but his

nature is a noble one, and by brain power he has raised himself to the enviable position of possessing three millions of money. Such meritorious peasants," remarked the old gentleman, with a side glance at his daughter, "might well marry into families of birth who have less of this world's goods. Then the sinking fabric of aristocratic domination might be saved from disappearance in this democratic age."

Hallon bit his lip as Dorothy shrugged again. Billy Minter had hinted twice and thrice that Sir John Newby wished to make Miss Clair his wife, and that the poverty-stricken father was not averse to being the Agamemnon to this Iphigenia. He dexterously turned the conversation. "If Richard Newby is his brother's second self in looks and nature, how comes it that he has not made a fortune? He ought to be his brother's partner and not his servant?"

"Richard is the double of Newby, save in brains," said Clair shortly.

"Then he lacks the best part," said Willy, brightly, and nobody contradicted this very obvious remark.

Mr Clair speculated a few more times as to what could have kept Sir John Newby from his hospitable board, and then Lady Panwin gave the signal for withdrawing to the drawing-room. Billy and Hallon were forced to remain behind and pass the very fruity port in what their host called the good old-fashioned way. They would much rather have wandered with the girls into the shadowy gardens.

And that is whether Dorothy and her bosom friend went. Lady Panwin took forty winks in the drawing-room, perhaps to illustrate the proverb that "He who sleeps dines!" and Dorothy clutched Willy with a frenzied grasp.

"Willy, have you got the usual?" she asked, in a whisper, and making for the door.

"Trust me, dear!" was Miss Minter's reply, and forthwith repaired to the hall, where her loose cloak was lying on a chair.

When they were in the garden the two girls fairly ran to a secluded summer-house—whence they could obtain a view of the dining-room windows—and Willy produced a parcel of bread and cheese, some

rich, home-made cake, and a bottle of ginger wine. These things she shared with Dorothy, and they proceeded to eat their dinner. Dorothy even asked a blessing, as her strong white teeth bit into a crust of bread, and solemnly thanked her friend.

"If it were not for you, Willy dear, I should die of starvation."

"Why don't you make them feed you better?" asked Miss Minter, eating at a great rate.

"It's no use. Auntie has only a hundred a year; and father has but three. They say that they can't make both ends meet on such an income."

"Why not make one end vegetables, then?" asked Willy, laughing at her stale joke. "But really, Dolly, it would be better to sell some of that silver and have better food. I'm nearly dead!"

"So am I. What delicious cheese this is! A glass of ginger wine! Oh, dear, darling Willy, here's your blessed health, you saviour of my life! What is the use," she went on, when the glass was empty, "of writing on a tinkery menu—'Potage de mouton à l'Ecoissaise,' when it's only Scotch broth?"

Willy shuddered, and swept the crumbs from her knees. "Don't insult Scotch broth, Dolly. What we had was water. When I think of Julia's soups"—Julia was the housekeeper—"rich, and hot, and——"

"Don't! Don't!" Dorothy was almost tearful. "You'll make me hungry again. Oh, dear me! I'll have to marry him after all!"

"Marry? Marry whom?" asked Wilhelmina, crossing her legs and lighting a cigarette. "Oh, yes. You mean that Newby man. I thought that was what Mr Clair meant at dinner."

"It's ridiculous, of course," said Dorothy, pensively watching Willy's enjoyment of a Nestor—she did not smoke herself. "He's old, and fat, and ugly; and I don't love him. Who could? A red-faced, elderly thing like that. But he's rich and kind-hearted, and I must manage to get decent meals somehow."

"Then marry Percy Hallon," said Willy, promptly. "He loves you, and you know that he loves you. Oh, yes, you may look as long as you like, miss, but

you do. And you love him—I'm sure of it. What's the use of telling lies, you silly little fool?"

"I'm not a fool, and I don't intend to tell lies," said Dorothy, haughtily.

"Then, confess."

"Confess what?"

"That he is—he."

"I do. He is—Percy."

"Oh—hum! You've got as far as his Christian name!"

"No, I haven't. Don't you dare, Wilhelmina Minter. He doesn't know that I—that I——"

"That you want to marry him for a square meal?" finished Willy frivolously.

"Oh!" Dorothy felt disgusted. "There's no romance about you!"

"There ought to be in this garden," said Willy, glancing round the quiet, shadowy pleasance. "But there, how can you expect romance after the dinner we have had?"

"Willy, you're always thinking of food."

"So were you until you finished that bread and cheese. But you are always thinking of that Newby creature, I suppose."

"Huh! I hate him! That is, I don't exactly hate him—as he's very nice and kind. But I can't marry him, and I shan't—there!"

"Storm at your father, dear, not at me," said Miss Minter, philosophically. "It's not my fault. But now that the Newby animal has disappeared, you had better turn your attention to Percy."

"How do I know that he loves me?" asked Dorothy, going off at a tangent.

"Because he said—oh, well, never mind."

"But I do! I do! He said, Willy, what did he say?"

"I'll leave him to explain when he comes out here."

"Willy"—in breathless excitement—"is he going to propose?"

"Yes. But he's doubtful about being accepted."

"And well he may be," said Dorothy, ruefully.

"He's not rich."

"You mercenary girl. He's got five hundred a

year of his own, and is in the motor business, which is the thing of the future. Besides, he is good-looking and well-born and well-bred. I don't know what more you require in a husband. As for your Sir John Newby——"

"He's not mine," said Dorothy, impatiently. "I'm sure I never wish to set eyes on him again, as he teases me so with his love-making. Only father does want money and I am so sick of poverty. If it were not for the money, a proud man like father, would never let me marry a low-born millionaire, however nice."

"Hum! Perhaps not. Do you intend to obey your father or your heart?"

"I don't know. I can't say. Of course, I love Percy—it's no use denying it, for I do love him. And he loves me, as I can see by his eyes. Lovely eyes, aren't they, Willy darling? But——"

"No 'buts,' Dolly. Marry him. If you don't you'll go on living at Poverty Hall for ever, now that Sir John is gone."

"I suppose so," sighed Dorothy, dismally; "unless the 'Devil's Ace' makes a change. You know the legend."

Miss Minter looked towards a ruined tower rising vaguely in the shadows. "Yes," she said gravely, "I know the legend."

CHAPTER II

"I DON'T!" said a pleasant voice at the elbow of Dorothy, and the two girls jumped up nervously, to find Hallon looking in at the side window of the summer-house. "Tell me the legend, Miss Clair."

"Oh!" cried Willy, irritably, "how you startled me. I wish you wouldn't walk like a cat, Percy."

"The turf deadened the sound of my footsteps, I expect. What times have you on your conscience, to make you so afraid?"

"We're not afraid," said Dorothy, untruthfully and illogically; "but these shadows, and your voice coming so suddenly, and the legend of the 'Devil's Ace,' would make any one afraid. I don't pretend to be any braver than my neighbours."

"What a contradictory speech!" laughed Hallon gaily. "And your legend sounds delightful. Do tell it to me, Miss Clair, and immediately. This is just the time for ghost stories."

"It's not a ghost story. It's a—a—well, I don't know what you would call it!"

"A lie!" said Willy, uncompromisingly. "But where is Billy?"

"With Mr Clair," said Percy, lazily. "They are walking on the terrace, and discussing the disappearance of Sir John Newby."

"Oh, dear me! I'm sick of hearing about it. I dare say he'll appear again very soon."

"I hope not," said Hallon, his eyes still on Dorothy; then he coloured violently. "That is, I hope he will. I don't wish him any harm."

Willy looked at him, amused. "All the same you would rather that he did not reappear. Is that it?"

"For some reasons, certainly," said Hallon, with

emphasis. And Dorothy's heart told her why he spoke so pointedly.

"In that case," observed Wilhelmina, wickedly, "I had better join my brother and our host on the terrace."

"So shall I," said Miss Clair, and linked her arm with that of her friend.

"What grammar!" groaned Willy. "And what silly stupidity! Oh! if you pinch me again, Dolly, I shall slap you. Here comes Billy!"

"I've left my pipe at home," said Billy breathlessly; "and I've finished my cigarettes. Do give me a cigar, old chap, or I shall die. That is, you know, Miss Clair, after a perfectly ripping meal I always enjoy a good smoke!"

"You never were diplomatic, Billy," said Dorothy.

"And why, 'Miss Clair'?"

"Oh, I always like to be stiff on these state occasions," rattled on Billy, puffing luxuriously. "Your father makes me mind my 'P's' and 'Q's,' you know. He's a gentleman of the old school, ain't he? Good old school! Glad I don't belong to it! I say, Dolly, you'll have to train Newby a lot, into buckram habits, when you marry him."

"I am not going to marry him," said Dorothy, violently. "What rubbish you talk, Billy!"

"It's your father has been talking it, then, my dear girl. He hinted that everything was as good as settled. Such a blow to me," complained the young man, with feigned grief, "when I was about to ask you to be Mrs Minter. Why are you so restless, Hallon?"

"I was thinking—er—that is, I was meditating on—on—Sir John Newby's disappearance," said Hallon, hurriedly, and making the first excuse that entered his head.

"Oh, bother!" cried Willy. "I'm sick of hearing about that old man. Can't we talk of something else?"

"I suggest," remarked Hallon, who leant against the summer-house with folded arms, "that Miss Clair should relate the legend of the 'Devil's Ace.' It's about that tower, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Dorothy, gravely, and drew closer to

Wilhelmina, as they sat together on the summer-house step; "and it's nothing to laugh at, Billy. You wouldn't be game to open that door."

Minter lay down again, and, putting his hands behind his head, stared upward into the depths of the purple summer sky strewn with stars. "I don't think it would do much good if I did open it, Dolly," he said. "The omen only touches members of your family, you know. But by Jupiter! if the opening of that door would change the luck, I wonder that Mr Clair hasn't opened it ages and ages ago."

"It might change it for the worse," said Dorothy, quickly. "My grandfather opened the door, and several of my ancestors; but the opening never brought the luck of money to the Clairs, and that is what they mostly need. Still, at a crisis of my life, I might break the spell, and change the lane down which I am at present travelling."

"Marriage is supposed to be a crisis," observed Willy, irrelevantly.

Hallon shifted restlessly, and threw away his half-smoked cigar. In a mechanical way he lighted another, and again folding his arms, looked towards the haunted tower—at least, he guessed that it was haunted from the various hints given by his three companions. "I should like to know what you are talking about," he observed, in an obviously self-repressed manner.

"Tell the legend, Dolly," commanded Miss Minter, abruptly. She was doing her best to bring about an understanding between the lovers, and thought that the family history might help.

"The legend," began Dorothy, so suddenly that Hallon started, "deals with a game of cards played by Amyas Clair in the reign of Henry VIII. He played with the last Abbot of the monastery."

"Jolly old Abbot!" murmured Billy the frivolous.

Dorothy took no heed. "That tower," she went on, pointing to the ruin, bulking blackly against the glimmering lights, "was part of the monastery—a small one, but rich in plate and rents and offerings of the faithful. When Amyas Clair received it from the King, he pulled down the greater part of the monastic buildings, and out of the stones built the

present Manor House. Only the tower was left standing, and that he and all his successors were afraid to pull down, because of the secret chamber."

"Secret!" echoed Wilhelmina. "Oh, nonsense! Why, every one knows the door, and where the key is. I could enter it in three minutes from now, Dolly. It was the chamber in which Amyas Clair played for the monastery with the Abbot—that's all."

"The people hereabouts call it the secret chamber," protested Dorothy. "And it is underground, remember, Willy dear. Only those who know the way, as you do, could find it."

"What happened in the chamber?" asked Hallon, curiously.

"Abbot Hurley was ordered by the King to give up the monastery to Amyas Clair," said Dorothy dreamily; "and, being a clever card-player, he proposed to surrender the building, if Amyas won a game."

"Good old sportsman!" said Billy. "I wonder if they played bridge."

"What rubbish!" said Willy. "As if bridge was invented; and, if it had been, two people could scarcely play it."

"I can't tell the legend if you interrupt," said Dolly, impetuously. "Do let me go on. Well, then, Amyas, thinking that there might be some difficulty in getting the monastery otherwise, since the peasants were ready to rise and protect the monks, agreed to play the game. He was a wicked man, and while the Abbot appealed to God to help him to win, Amyas asked the Devil for aid. The game was a close one, and when it was nearly ended, Abbot Hurley was winning. Amyas then called again on the Devil, and finally turned up the ace of spades, which decided that he was to possess the monastery. Abbot Hurley went away with his monks, but left a curse on the tower, and on the chamber wherein the game was played."

"And the curse?" asked Hallon, after a pause.

"He said that every time a Clair entered the chamber below the tower and turned the ace of spades—which was left on the stone table after the game—the luck of the family would change. Several,

as I said, attempted it, but every time the luck changed to something worse. Therefore, my father is afraid to tempt the fates again, lest he should lose what little remains to him. But I don't think things can get much worse with our family," added Dorothy, pensively, "since we have come to almost our last shilling. Therefore, when a crisis comes in my life, I intend to enter the chamber and turn the 'Devil's Ace.'"

"The card is called that?" asked the engineer.

"Yes. And tradition says it is the very ace of spades which Amyas turned up to win the game which gave him the Manor."

There was a pause, while Hallon thought over the strange story. Billy yawned and stretched himself and rose to his feet. At that moment the tall form of Mr Clair was seen coming out of the drawing-room window, and appeared black against the light of the lamp. Wilhelmina, aware that if he came down there would be no chance of Percy putting his fortunes to the test, seized her brother's arm. "Let us see Mr Clair," she said, hurriedly. "Come along, Billy, I have an idea about Sir John Newby's disappearance." And before the astonished young man could remonstrate, she was hurrying him across the lawn. Hallon and Miss Clair were left comparatively alone, and she felt that his burning eyes were on her blushing face.

"I must go," she said, in a low, hurried voice, and rose abruptly.

"No," he said, catching her arm gently. "I wish to ask you something."

"Another time—another time."

"I can't wait," declared the impatient lover, impetuously. "This is the hour and the place, and my opportunity."

"For what?" she asked, nervously, not looking at him, but at her father and his two guests, who were re-entering the lighted drawing-room. The question was needless—both knew that.

"Listen!" Hallon raised his finger.

From a near thicket at the base of the ruined tower came a long trill of song, rich and passionate. Some wandering nightingale was pouring out his heart to

the summer night, and to the sleeping roses. Quick and hurried gushed the liquid notes, filling the air with golden minstrelsy. The night, as did the lovers, listened breathlessly to the varied strains. Now came a joyous burst of bubbling glee; anon a strain of melancholy, heart-breaking and poignant. Higher and higher rose the mellow voice in rapid flutings and tremulous shakes, until it died away on the palpitating air in one low, sad note of despair.

"You know now," whispered Hallon. His arm glided round her waist, his passionate eyes looked into her own, and their two souls blended in the hush of the holy night. "You know now."

"I have known all along," she whispered back, and hid her face in his breast with a sob of joy.

"Oh! my dearest, and will you—will you——?"

"Yes!" And again arose, triumphantly glorious, the epithalamium of the hidden bird. The two, who were now one, never again to be two, did not speak. There was no need of words. The nightingale told in eloquent music all they felt, all they longed for, voicing in song the golden sentence of that supreme hour. They were Romeo and Juliet, Hero and Leander, Anthony and Cleopatra. The spring-tide bliss of all lovers in all ages brimmed to fulness in that moment, which was less of time than of eternity. And divinity ran in fire through their veins.

"Come!" said Dorothy, disengaging herself from the close embrace.

"Whither?" asked Hallon, poetically, as she drew him swiftly across the lawn. Usually he was commonplace in his choice of words, but who could help being a poet when standing in the golden light poured then from the wide-flung gates of heaven?

"The chamber—the card!" she said, rapidly and brokenly. "This is the time and the place. You spoke of it yourself. My fortunes and yours. Both are now one. We must know what will happen—we must turn the ace!"

"No, no!" He caught her back as she was passing into the wood round the tower. "I dare not. It is dangerous."

"Are you, then, so superstitious?" she asked, doubtfully.

"I was not, for I had nothing then to lose. But now—with you. Oh! Dorothy, do not tempt God, my dearest."

"Has God anything to do with the ace of spades?"

"No! That is why. That wicked game—that playing with evil. Don't let such things come into our lives. Besides"—Hallon strove to assert his common sense, sorely shaken by the hour and the circumstance—"besides, it's all rubbish, you know."

"In that case, to enter the chamber can do no harm," said Dorothy, lightly. "To change our fortunes, we must turn the card. At least, I must, being a Clair. My father will not allow me to marry you, since he wishes me to become the wife of Sir John Newby. He will make trouble, and may part us. By turning the ace the luck will change."

"For the worse, it may be," muttered the young man, uneasily. "Besides, I don't believe there is a card!"

"There may not be. The chamber has not been opened since the time of my grandfather, fifty years ago. I dare say it's all rubbish. Still, I have always said that when a crisis came I should venture my fortunes in this way. As things stand, everything is against our marriage. To change circumstances by turning the 'Devil's Ace' may bring us happiness."

"We are happy now," urged Hallon, much vexed. "I don't believe much in the Unseen. Still, by attempting to meddle with such things, we may open a door which we may not be able to close."

"Then you believe—"

"I neither believe nor disbelieve, but—"

Dorothy shrugged a wilful shoulder, and, not giving him time to repeat his warning, she vanished into the door of the tower. Hallon could do nothing else but follow her, and was at her heels in a moment. Within the ill-omened tower, they were both fully committed to the adventure, so he did not again attempt to change her purpose. Dorothy caught him by the hand, and led him along for some little distance. Shortly Hallon felt that he was descending a ruined stair. Although it was as black as the pit, his guide seemed to know her way perfectly, and he surrendered himself unresistingly to her will. Down and down

they went by the twisted staircase, until they arrived on a damp and unwholesome pavement. Along this Dorothy ran, dragging him eagerly. The passage was narrow, and the walls dripped with water. Suddenly she stopped, and, reaching up, groped for something. The ring of falling metal on the flags told him that the key had been placed hereabouts in some niche. Hallon's superstitious fears were again aroused, and he again tried to hold her back. But, with wilful persistency, Dorothy snatched her hand from his grasp, and a moment later he heard the grating of the key in the old-fashioned, clumsy lock.

"Have you a match?" asked Miss Clair, in a matter-of-fact way, but her voice sounded eerie in the velvety darkness.

Hallon, as angry with himself and her as a lover well could be for this nightmare journey, fumbled in his vest pocket, and brought out a silver box. In the pale glimmer of the lighted lucifer he saw that they were facing a squat, arched portal, the door of which was open. The thought of what might lurk beyond in the gloom, and the memory of that accursed card, set his teeth on edge.

"Don't, Dorothy," he implored, secretly annoyed by his weakness at being so strongly influenced by things he disbelieved in. "Come back!"

But she had already flitted over the fatal threshold, and as the match burned his fingers in an expiring flicker, he caught a momentary glimpse of her white dinner-dress. There was nothing left for him but to follow, so he cautiously advanced, while striking another lucifer. As the gleam of the tiny flame spread, he heard and saw Dorothy feeling her way round the walls. Then she stepped forward into the middle of the crypt—for the chamber was nothing else. Suddenly she cried out, as though the unexpected had frightened her.

"Oh!" sobbed Dorothy, "something soft and human—a body. Oh!"

Hallon hastily struck three matches at once, and was by her side in an instant. The glimmer fell on something long and dark lying on a stone table. Dorothy clutched him and screamed again.

"A dead body!" she gasped. "On the table—where the game was played!"

"Impossible!" said Hallon, and advanced the matches close to where he presumed the head might be. As the sharp, wax-like countenance grew out of the gloom, Dorothy uttered a final cry of alarm and unconcealed terror. She had found what she little expected to find.

"Sir John Newby!" she stuttered. "Oh, oh! Sir John Newby!"

And then the light went out.

CHAPTER III •

MR CLAIR, seated in the shabby drawing-room, with crossed legs and closed finger-tips, was boring an audience of three with speculations as to the disappearance of Sir John Newby. From time to time Billy glanced reproachfully at his sister, mutely asking why she had placed him in so unpleasant a position. Willy had not thought fit to explain her reasons, lest the young man, secretly amorous of Dorothy, should interrupt the lovers at an inopportune moment. So Mr Clair prosed on, eminently refined and extraordinarily dull.

"I expected Sir John by the four o'clock train on Saturday," he complained, plaintively "And Lady Panwin had prepared everything for his reception—you remember, Selina, what trouble you took. I remember that when my expected guest did not arrive, I walked as far as the Cuckoo's Grove, thinking that Newby might have taken a short cut through there, instead of proceeding by the high road. Of course, were things different—as regards money, I mean—I should have sent a carriage, but my means being what they are, Sir John expressed, in his letter accepting my invitation, an intention of walking. It is quite a mile from the railway station—"

"A trifle over, I think, sir," interrupted Billy, respectfully.

"I—think—not," rebuked Mr Clair, slowly, "I have frequently walked it, coming through the Cuckoo's Grove."

"That short cut lessens the distance, of course," assented the young man, suppressing a yawn. "So you did not see Sir John there, Mr Clair?"

"Had I seen him," rebuked the old gentleman

again, "I certainly should have brought him back to dinner. I did not enter the Grove, but paused on the outskirts and gazed along the road in the direction of the railway station. I did not see him, and so returned to my own house—after a short stroll—extremely disappointed."

"You were late for dinner," said Lady Panwin, who was tatting—an early Victorian craze she indulged in. "Yes, Francis, you need not deny it, for you left the house at six, and it was ten minutes after eight when you returned. I am positive of the time, because the duck was over-cooked. I asked Jules, who had been to the village for a bottle of white vinegar, if he had seen you, and he had not."

"Jules probably came round by the road, Selina, and I—as I have clearly stated—was hovering on the outskirts of the Cuckoo's Grove. I was late," proceeded Mr Clair, while Billy and Willy looked at one another, wondering when this small-beer chronicle was coming to an end, "I know that well, Selina, and you need not remind me of the painful circumstance that, owing to my anxiety for Sir John, I was forced—for the first time in my life—to sit down to dinner in my ordinary clothes, after a hasty wash."

"Did that matter?" asked Miss Minter, innocently. Mr Clair looked shocked. "Etiquette, my dear, is what raises us above savages. It was very painful for me to find myself not in evening dress at ten minutes past eight on Saturday. I shall certainly point out to Newby how his negligence caused me to commit a breach of good manners. Lady Panwin"—he rose and bowed to his sister—"was kind enough to excuse me."

"Oh! it didn't matter," said Lady Panwin, carelessly. "The duck was beautifully cooked, after all. Three-and-six it cost, and——"

Her brother raised his hand. "Pardon me, Selina, but these domestic details scarcely interest our young guests. You are democratic, Selina!"

"When Willy and Billy marry," said Lady Panwin, obstinately, "they will be forced to attend to such things. It's just as well to inform them."

"I know all about them now, dear Lady Panwin,"

said Miss Minter, merrily. "On our small income I have to do a great deal."

"As to being democratic," went on the old lady, paying no attention to this speech, "I suit myself to the age. What's the use of birth when there's scarcely a shilling to spend?"

"You shock me, Selina—you shock me! Such sentiments remind me of the worst excesses of the French Revolution."

"My dear Francis, owing to Panwin's estates having passed to his skinflint heir, without any provision having been made for me, I have experienced poverty, as you know. But that Panwin gave me a good wardrobe, during our year of married life, I don't know how I should clothe myself. What's a hundred a year, and——"

Mr Clair's silvery hair rose on end. He and his sister always differed in this way, and generally in company, as Lady Panwin would not be suppressed.

"There is no need to let the world know of your unfortunate position, Selina."

"These two infants being the world," snapped Lady Panwin, "it's no use, Francis. I always call a spade a spade, and I hope with all my heart that Dorothy will marry Sir John Newby, and bring money into the family. I declare, if I were only a stronger-minded woman, that I would go to the tower and turn the 'Devil's Ace' at once, in the hope of our luck changing."

"The door of that wicked chamber will never be opened during my lifetime," cried Mr Clair, vehemently, and rose to give effect to his speech. "My grandfather ventured in and nearly ruined himself."

"But, surely," said Willy, curiously, "you don't believe in such rubbish, Mr Clair?"

"Rubbish!" the old gentleman gasped. "Ah, well, rubbish to you, Wilhelmina, who are not a Clair. But to me, to Dorothy, to Lady Panwin yonder——"

"Don't bring me in, Francis; I'm partly a sceptic myself."

"Then, Selina, you are not a genuine Clair."

"I'm a genuine pauper, I think," sighed Lady

Panwin, feeling if her hair was in good order. "And if—— Oh, mercy me! What's that?"

She rose with a scream, and the remaining three people also sprang up, but without the scream. Through the French window, which was one of three opening on to the terrace, came Hallon, bearing in his arms the insensible body of Dorothy. Before the startled quartette could gain breath to ask necessary questions, he laid the girl down on an adjacent sofa, and explained.

"She has fainted," he said, rapidly, and evidently strung up to a high pitch of excitement. "We were going to turn the 'Devil's Ace,' and——"

"What!" cried Mr Clair, furiously, and finding his voice with surprising rapidity. "Do you dare to say that you have been to the tower?"

"Yes, Dorothy——"

"Dorothy, sir?" foamed Mr Clair.

"Yes," said Hallon, obstinately. "Dorothy is engaged to me, and we went to turn the ace and change the luck, and—and——"

"Oh, don't talk so much," cried Lady Panwin, irritably, "but ring the bell for water."

By this time she and Wilhelmina were attending to Dorothy. Billy sprang to the bell, and Mr Clair, absolutely dumfounded by Hallon's announcement of the engagement, stood stuttering incoherent remarks. But before he could gain control, and deliver himself of his opinion, the young engineer inflicted a second blow on his self-complacency.

"We have found Sir John Newby. He is dead—murdered!"

Mr Clair dropped back into his chair, gasping, with staring eyes and open mouth. He looked very undignified, but this new intelligence, coming on top of the other, reduced him to impotence. The two women attending to Dorothy looked round with inarticulate exclamations. Only Billy Minter retained sufficient command of motion and speech to spring forward and seize Percy's arm. "Hallon! Hallon! Are you mad? Have you lost your wits?"

"I very nearly did, with the horror of the thing," said Hallon, passing a handkerchief across his dry, white lips. "Fancy coming on that corpse in the

darkness. I struck a match and saw the face, and—and—ugh!" he shivered. "I'll never get over the sight."

"Sir John Newby murdered," groaned Mr Clair, still staring, as his wrath at the idea of Dorothy's engagement to this young man was swallowed up in amazed terror at the later intelligence, "in my house."

"He was not murdered here, surely?" said Billy, aghast.

"I don't know where he was murdered, or how, or why," said Hallor, dropping into a chair in his turn. "All I know is that Sir John Newby lies dead on the stone table in the chamber under the tower. There is blood on the stones, so he must have been killed in some way. Ah!" he sprang up and forward as Dorothy sighed and opened her eyes. "My darling! My——"

Clair rose suddenly and pushed him back. "You must not approach my daughter or speak to her. I refuse to sanction this preposterous engagement. You must——"

"Francis," cried Lady Panwin, rising, tall and gaunt, "what's the use of talking about such things in the presence of death? Where's Jules?"

A neat, lean-faced, black-haired little man, with fishy, dark eyes, and a deferential manner, stepped forward and took the glass of water from his mistress. "Here, milady," he said, in very good English, and in a meek tone which fitted his servile looks.

"Go down to the chamber under the tower, Jules, and see if what Mr Hallor says is true."

"I know not where this chamber is, milady," said Jules, respectfully.

"I forgot. Billy, you go. Francis, go with him. Willy, you and I must take Dorothy to her room. She is still faint. Jules, go to the village and tell Dr Hart to come at once, and bring back the constable with you immediately."

"Selina!" cried her brother, furiously. "A policeman in my house!"

"Don't be silly, Francis," retorted Lady Panwin, tartly. "If a murder has been committed, we must do all we can to find the criminal. Go away, Jules,

and do what I tell you." She stamped her foot. "Why are you staring there, like a stuck pig, man?"

Jules vanished promptly, and Billy would have followed, but that Mr Clair caught his arm. "I won't—I won't—have a policeman here!" he stammered, and looked like a badly-frightened man—as indeed he was. "Think of the disgrace—the danger, Selina!"

"Danger—pshaw! You didn't murder the man yourself, Francis."

"I—I—I commit a crime? Oh, this is too much!" Mr Clair dropped again into his chair, and turned so markedly white that Hallon thought he would faint also. "Get me some wine," gurgled Mr Clair, who really had received a very severe shock.

Lady Panwin, who was supporting Dorothy to the door, turned round as her brother spoke. A curious expression came over her face, and she involuntarily glanced at a portrait over the piano. It was that of a Georgian soldier, as Hallon—whose eyes followed hers—saw in a moment. But Lady Panwin frowned when she noted that he was watching her, and surrendered her niece to Willy. "Take her to her room," she said, sharply. "I'll attend to my brother. Billy, you and Mr Hallon go to the tower. The 'Devil's Ace' indeed," muttered the gaunt, energetic woman, between her teeth; "it's got us into worse trouble than ever, I think."

While she procured wine for her half-fainting relative, Hallon and young Minter disappeared through the window, in order to explore the crypt, with a lantern. Wilhelmina, pale and silent—for she, also, was shocked and startled—helped Dorothy up the stairs. That young lady was trying her best to recover her nerve, and succeeded very well by the time she arrived in her own room.

"What a fool you must think me, Willy," she said, snatching at a bottle of Eau de Cologne, and wetting her handkerchief; "but I could not help myself. The darkness, and that poor man's face. Ugh!" she shook nervously.

"Are you sure the dead man is Sir John Newby?" asked Willy, awestruck.

"Oh, yes!" replied Dorothy, dabbing her fore-

head with the scent. "I knew him the moment Percy held the match to his poor white face. Oh dear me, Willy! And in life it was so red and healthy! Ugh! Ugh! He looks like a waxwork now—one of those things in the Chamber of Horrors. I'll be haunted by that face."

"But how on earth could Sir John Newby's body get into that vault?"

"How should I know," said Dorothy, querulously, for her nerves still quivered and inflicted pain. "Of course, it has been shut up for years and years—since the time of my grandfather. But the key is in the passage niche, and anyone could enter if he chose."

"But no one would know where the chamber was, unless they were guided, Dorothy. How, then, could——"

"Oh! Willy, don't ask questions which you know I can't answer. Everyone in the neighbourhood knows the legend, and that the chamber is under the old monastery tower. It is hard to find, I know; still, any one might stumble on it, if he took the right passage."

"And if he did not?" asked Willy, quickly.

"Then he would get lost in one of the other passages. There's a perfect set of catacombs under Abbot Hurlay's Tower. Father has a plan of the foundations. But the luck! Oh dear me, Willy, I have changed the luck. Though to be sure," ended Dorothy, doubtfully, "I did not turn the ace of spades."

"Did you intend to?"

"Of course. When Percy proposed, and I accepted him——"

"Oh, Dolly, have you accepted?"

"Yes. But I can't talk of it now. Everything is swallowed up in this horror. Really, I don't know if I can marry Mr Hallon now. He will ever be connected in my thoughts with this murder."

"What nonsense!" said Willy, spiritedly. "He's a dear good fellow, and you are a lucky girl to win him. If I were a marrying woman," added Miss Minter, with determination, "I should marry him myself. Did he propose to visit the tower?"

"No. He tried to persuade me not to go. I wish I had obeyed him now," said Dorothy, with a shudder. "Fancy going there, and finding that corpse in the darkness! But I can't have changed, the luck in earnest," she went on, trying to comfort herself. "I didn't turn the ace, remember; and the spell won't work unless a Clair does that."

Willy stood at the window, with her face pressed against the glass, and looked at the base of the dark tower, which could be seen from Dorothy's bedroom. "There's the policeman," she announced. "Jules is with him, I think."

"How can you tell in this uncertain light?" said Dorothy, coming to the window herself.

"I can see Hobson's uniform; and as Jules went for him, I presume that the other man with him is Jules. Oh! Dolly, I wonder who killed that poor man, and why he should have been murdered?"

"Let us find out," said Dorothy, linking her arm in that of Willy's.

"But your nerves, dear?"

"They are all right now—that is, I can exercise self-control. It was silly of me to give way. I never ainted before in my life. Oh, what an unpleasant memory I shall have of my second proposal?"

"Your second?"

"Yes. You know that poor Sir John asked me to be Lady Newby, and I refused, much to my father's anger. But I really could not bring myself to marry such an old man, for money. I would rather live with Percy in a cottage than with Sir John in a palace. Oh, I am sorry he is dead—for he was a good man, and never bored me, except when he made love. Who can have killed him?"

"Some one who knew the way to the crypt," said Willy, decisively.

"I don't think you know what you are talking about," cried Dorothy, impetuously. "I know the way, and aunt knows it, as does father. You are not going to accuse any of us, are you?"

"No. But"—Willy paused. She thought of Mr. Blair's terrified face, of Lady Pashwin's apprehensive look, and again remembered the difficulty of finding the crypt. A terrible thought flashed across her

mind, which she quickly dismissed. "It's impossible!" she muttered.

"What is impossible?" asked Dorothy, as they left the bedroom.

"Nothing, dear—nothing. But I should like to know for certain who killed this poor man, and for what reason."

"The police will find that out," said Dorothy, with a shudder. "Oh dear—oh dear!" she remarked for the third time. "How I wish I had not gone near the secret chamber. The luck has changed, and things are worse instead of better."

CHAPTER IV

WILLY made no answer. She was still wondering in her own mind—for the thought would not be dismissed—if Francis Clair had anything to do with the death of Newby, and the concealment of his body. It was ridiculous, of course, even to think of such a thing. All the same, Mr Clair, by his own confession, had walked to the Cuckoo's Grove to see if Sir John were coming. He could have come and gone in twenty minutes, yet he was absent from the Manor for two hours and more, according to Lady Panwin. What if he had met with Newby, and had quarrelled with him, and then—? But it was absurd to build up such a theory without any solid foundation. The millionaire was Mr Clair's best friend, and had been anxious to marry Dorothy. The match would have put a final end to Mr Clair's monetary troubles. Therefore, there was no reason why Clair should have committed such a purposeless crime; let alone the fact that a frail, delicate old gentleman like Francis Clair would scarcely have ventured to attack such a burly son of the soil as the deceased stock-broker.

When the girls re-entered the drawing-room, Lady Panwin, very white, but very composed, was talking to Hallon. She turned with a start when the newcomers entered—a strange thing for Lady Panwin to do, as she often boasted of her immunity from nerves.

"I am glad you are looking better, Dorothy," she said to her niece, in a markedly quiet tone of voice. "Billy has gone to Axleigh on his bicycle to bring the inspector here."

"And my father?" asked Dorothy, quickly.

"I have made him lie down. He has sustained a

severe shock, and at his age such a thing may break up his health entirely."

"What about the—the body, Percy?" asked Willy, hesitating.

"Billy and I found it in the vault," he said, with forced composure, "and we have left it there until the inspector arrives. Hobson is guarding the door of the tower."

"And Sir John really has been murdered?"

"Yes. We turned over the body to search for a wound. The poor man had been stabbed from behind—that is, he was struck under the left shoulder-blade, and must have died almost immediately."

"Did you find any knife?"

"No. The body was simply laid out, face upward on the stone table in the centre of the vault."

"How is it dressed?" asked Lady Panwin, suddenly.

"In a suit of grey tweed, with brown boots."

"And the hat?"

"We could not find any hat." . . .

Lady Panwin hesitated, and glanced sideways at the two girls, whose faces were white and horror-stricken. "I suppose," she said, as though she hoped to be contradicted—"I suppose the body is that of Sir John Newby?"

"Oh, yes!" said Dorothy, quickly. "I recognised him the moment Percy struck the match."

Willy, still haunted by her foreboding concerning Mr Clair, ventured a question. "Do you think he was stabbed in the vault?"

"I can't say," said Hallon, pondering; "but from the absence of the hat, and possibly of the weapon which slew him, I should think that he had been killed somewhere else, and then the assassin concealed the body in the crypt."

Miss Minter's face cleared. So fragile a man as Mr Clair could never have carried so heavy a corpse from the Cuckoo's Grove to the tower.

The next day, everyone, far and wide, knew of the tragedy which had taken place in the haunted tower of Abbot Hurley. On Tuesday night, when the body was discovered, the Belfair villagers learnt about the murder from Constable Hobson, who could not hold

his tongue; and, as the news had been carried to Axleigh by Billy Minter, when seeking the Inspector of Police in that town, for obvious reasons the bare fact became speedily known there also. But it appeared inconceivable to everyone at the Manor that the London morning papers should be in a position to publish sensational headlines concerning the death of the noted millionaire. It was probable, as Hallon suggested, that some busybody in Beltan, anxious to earn a cheap five shillings, had wired to London. But even then, as it was after eight o'clock when the corpse was found, this unknown person must have procured the opening of the telegraph office. It really seemed as though some individual was, anxious that the intelligence of Sir John Newby's terrible end should be known as speedily as possible.

Not that such immediate dissemination of the dreadful news mattered much. Events were succeeding one another too rapidly to permit the mind of any one to dwell upon single items for any length of time. The one fact—the principal fact, the dreadful truth—was that Sir John Newby had been brutally done to death; and the burning question of the hour was: Who had murdered him? No one could answer this—not even Inspector Trusk, of Axleigh, a particularly zealous and sharp-sighted officer, whom Billy had brought back on that same night. Certainly, Inspector Trusk did not commit himself to an opinion. He was too clever for that. He simply examined the body, the vault, and the tower; took the report of Dr Hart, and questioned closely the inmates of the Manor. Not one of the six people who had been at the dinner-table could throw any light on the matter; and the servants, from Jules, the butler, to George, the gardener's boy, were equally ignorant. The sinister affair was as complete a mystery as could have been found in any detective story.

After the first shock Mr Clair quite recovered his nerve, and took matters into his own hands. That is, he saw Inspector Trusk, and explained all about the invitation and the non-appearance of the expected guest. He was also present when the servants and his guests were questioned, and finally related to the sceptical police-officer the legend of the tower. Mr

Clair was particularly emphatic in insisting that the vault had never been opened for over fifty years.

"Can you be sure of that?" asked Trusk, doubtfully. "You tell me that the key of the door was usually left in a niche of the passage. Any one could have entered?"

"No one could have known where the secret chamber was," said Mr Clair, obstinately. "There is one passage leading to the chamber, certainly, but three or four branch off. A stranger would probably lose his way in such a labyrinth—and in the darkness too."

"Could you make a mistake yourself, sir?"

"No. That is, if I went down I should certainly take a lantern and the plan with me."

"Oh!" Trusk pricked up his ears. "Then there is a plan?"

"Yes. One which dates from Elizabethan times. It was made by an ancestor of mine who ventured to turn the 'Devil's Ace,' with bad results, and who——"

"But you really do not believe, Mr Clair, that——"

Mr Clair interrupted with dignified rebuke.

"Pardon me, but I believe that the last Abbot of the monastery did curse the tower, and I believe that the turning of the ace is fatal to any member of my family. Several of my ancestors and my own grandfather risked the danger, and with bad results. And now, when my daughter goes—against my express wish," said Mr Clair, with emphasis—"this horrible thing comes to trouble my peace."

"But I understand that Miss Clair did not turn the ace," urged the inspector. "She never even saw the card—if card there is; which I doubt, as, when searching the vault, we did not find one."

"A mere visit of a Clair to the secret chamber is enough to alter the family luck," said Mr Clair, clinging tenaciously to the legend which added dignity to his family history. "You can see for yourself that trouble has come with my daughter's rash intrusion into that unhallowed chamber."

"It is strange, certainly," assented Trusk, nursing his chin. "Did you ever shew the chamber to Sir John?"

"No. He knew the legend, like everyone else, and even asked me to shew him the fatal spot. But I always refused. Until I went down with you, Inspector, to view the body of my lamented friend, I never set foot on those stairs."

"Then how do you know where the chamber is?" asked Trusk, sharply.

"By the plan. Stay!" Mr Clair rose. "I will bring the plan to you. It is in the library." And he went out.

Trusk made points in the blotting-paper with his pencil. Being an ordinary every day mortal, he could not bring himself to credit the truth of the Clair legend; yet he could not deny but what the visit of Dorothy had brought the expected trouble. Contrary to the expressed opinion of Percy Hallon, the inspector believed that Sir John had been decoyed to the vault, and there had been murdered by a foul blow, before he could turn round or cry out. But only some one who knew the way to the vault could have so decoyed him. Unless Sir John himself had learnt the way—yet Mr Clair declared that he had never shewn him the route.

"It's most extraordinary," said Mr Clair, re-entering at this moment, and with a large thin morocco-covered volume in his hand, "but the plan of the catacombs under the tower has been torn out of this book. You can see for yourself," and he tendered the volume to Trusk.

CHAPTER V

It was perfectly true. The plan had been roughly torn out, as could easily be seen from the ragged edges remaining. "When was this done, sir?" asked the inspector after a thoughtful pause.

"How should I know?" asked Mr Clair in his turn, and with great indignation. "The book has been on a top shelf of the library for years. If I knew the person who thus destroyed a valuable and unique book, I should——"

"Find the murderer," said the inspector, promptly.

"Did you ever shew this book to Sir John?"

"No," said Mr Clair, positively; "I never did."

"Then Sir John could not have known the way to the vault?"

"To my knowledge he never even entered the tower."

"Oh, come now! Such an interesting ruin, sir. He must have——"

"What I mean is that Sir John never went below, into the catacombs, Mr Inspector. Certainly he climbed the tower, and walked on the sward within; but knowing my aversion to any one going below, on account of our family legend, he did not descend. I admit," added Mr Clair, "that, to an inquiring mind, such as Sir John's was, a visit to these catacombs would have been interesting. For catacombs they are, sir; and no doubt many of the old monks were buried there."

Trusk put the books on one side, and again began to talk. "I may tell you, Mr Clair, that I have traced Sir John's movements on the day of his death, and I have been in communication with Scotland Yard this morning."

"What!" exclaimed Clair, astonished. "It is very early to gain any knowledge, and to be in

communication with the London authorities. I should not have thought you had time."

"On the news of Sir John's death being given to me by Mr Minter last night," said Trusk, deliberately, "I telegraphed to the Yard. If you remember, Mr Clair, the newspapers were already talking about the disappearance of Sir John and his secretary."

"Richard! His brother!" said Mr Clair. "Heaven bless me, Mr Inspector, has Richard disappeared also?"

"He has. The news of Sir John's disappearance was announced in the newspapers of yesterday morning."

"I know that. I read the information. But Richard——"

"The evening papers said that he had vanished also," interrupted the inspector. "But those you did not see, I presume."

"No. We do not take in evening papers at the Manor. Well?"

"Well, this morning Scotland Yard sent down a detective, who is at present examining the vault."

"Why was I not informed?" asked Clair, indignantly. "Why was this man not presented to me?"

"He wished to examine the vault at once," said Trusk, soothingly, "and will make his report to you"—he put this in as a sop to Mr Clair's vanity—"at a later hour. But to continue. I went to the Beltan Station to see if Sir John had arrived. I wonder you did not think of doing that also, Mr Clair."

"You forget," said the old gentleman, with dignity, "that I never knew of the death until late last night. This morning I have had no time to go. And I may remark, sir, that when my guest did not arrive on Saturday, I walked as far as the Cuckoo's Grove to see if there was any sign of him. His non-arrival and my watching made me late for dinner. Finally, Mr Inspector, if Sir John had arrived, surely there would not have been this talk of his disappearance in the papers, since he has frequently visited me, and the stationmaster at Beltan knows him excellently by sight."

"Quite so," assented Trusk. "But the hue-and-cry only commenced yesterday, and the stationmaster communicated at once with Scotland Yard. He stated to the authorities there, and he stated to me, that Sir John arrived at Beltan by the half-past six train."

"Dear me! Then why did he not come to dinner?"

"Can you ask that, when you have seen his corpse?" said Trusk, quickly. "The poor gentleman was murdered. And I must say that his movements were strange."

"How do you mean, strange?" asked Clair, looking puzzled.

"Sir John arrived with a portmanteau, but instead of taking a fly and driving to this place, he left the portmanteau in the cloak-room, saying that he would return for it later, and left the station."

"Where did he go?"

"Ah! that is what no one can say. I have not yet questioned the village people; but certainly some one must have seen him, since it was a bright summer's evening."

"I did not see him," said Mr Clair, reflectively, "and I lingered for quite a long time near the Cuckoo's Grove."

"Why near there, especially?"

"Because there is a short cut through that wood to this place. I fancied that Sir John, who is a great walker, might have taken that way in preference to driving in a fly in the high road."

"Would you mind describing exactly what you did?"

"Not at all," said Mr Clair, graciously. "I left this house at six, and arrived at the Cuckoo's Grove at half-past. I strolled gently along—for with quick walking I could have reached it earlier. I waited near the Grove until nearly seven, then walked to see old Mrs Folks, who is a humble pensioner of my own. I chatted with her until nearly eight o'clock, and so was ten minutes late for dinner. On returning to my house, I found, with great surprise, that Sir John had not arrived. I sent a wire and a letter, but to neither have I received a reply. I understand, now, how I did not," ended Mr Clair, in melancholy tones.

"Did you ever hear that Sir John's life was threatened?"

"No. He never hinted at such a thing. Moreover, he was a good man, and a philanthropist. No one would have harmed him."

"It seems to me that some one has," said Trusk, grimly. "Well, it is a mystery, and no mistake!"

"How was Sir John dressed when the station-master saw him?"

"In a grey tweed suit—the same style as that his corpse is dressed in, Mr Clair."

"Ah! Newby always wore the same kind of suit in summer. Grey tweed, with a white waistcoat and brown boots, and a South African hat."

Trusk rose. "That reminds me that we cannot find the hat. It is not in the vault."

"Mr Hallon thinks, from the fact," explained Clair, "that my poor friend was not murdered in the vault."

"I don't agree with Mr Hallon," said Trusk, tartly. "But certainly there is nothing to shew why Sir John went into the vault. We have searched the pockets of the corpse, and have only found a few business letters addressed to him at his city office, a watch and chain, and some silver money. Does it not strike you, Mr Clair, that a rich man like Sir John would naturally carry gold?"

"Well, yes," assented the old gentleman, reflectively. "And what evidence do you deduce from that, Mr Inspector?"

"That Sir John was robbed, and that robbery was the motive for the committal of the crime."

"Oh, I shouldn't say that, Mr Inspector. Had robbery been the motive, the assassin would undoubtedly have taken the watch."

"It's the watch that puzzles me," said Trusk, bending his brows; "a cheap silver watch only costing a few pounds at most, which the murderer did not think worth taking. Of course, millionaires have their whims, Mr Clair, but I should fancy that the deceased gentleman would have worn something more expensive."

"He did," said Clair, promptly. "Newby possessed a very fine gold watch, given by some South

African friends. It had an inscription. I have seen it frequently."

"Do you mean to say that Sir John always wore a gold watch?"

"Certainly. I am positive."

"Then the silver watch must belong to the assassin?" said Trusk, in an excited manner, and thinking that he had chanced upon a clue. "Yes, I am sure, and yet"—his face fell—"the murderer would certainly not leave such a piece of evidence behind him."

"You can trace the watch by the number, Mr Inspector?"

"Yes—that is—I think so." Trusk impatiently pushed the desk papers about, and looked discontented. The case was puzzling him more and more.

"I presume there is no doubt but what the corpse is that of Sir John Newby?" he asked after a pause.

Mr Clair raised his eyebrows. "There is no doubt in my mind upon that point," he said, emphatically.

"Strange! Strange!" murmured the other, and was about to speak again when the door opened to admit a smart young man with beady black eyes, and of a somewhat Semitic appearance. His dark face was flushed, and he held out a torn paper to Trusk. "This is what I found in the vault," he said, eagerly. "You and your men did not search very thoroughly, Mr Inspector."

"Who is this?" inquired Clair, testily, while Trusk's eye skimmed over the torn letter—for that it was.

"I am Swanson, of Scotland Yard," said the detective, passing his card to the old gentleman. "Happy to make your acquaintance, sir. I hope to discover the assassin of Sir John Newby, and remove the stain from your house. Very unpleasant to have a crime committed under the roof of this very desirable residence."

"It was not committed under this roof, sir," said Clair, in pompous and vexed tones, "but under the earth—"

Swanson's beady eyes had been fixed in a hard, inquiring manner on Clair's face. The reply seemed to settle something in his mind, and he did not give

the other time to finish his sentence. "You are both right and wrong, Mr Clair. The murder was not committed under this roof. I said that merely to try you—that is, in case you should have heard a noise, or have seen a bloodstain."

"I heard nothing. I saw nothing," said Clair, haughtily. "Do you think that I am cognisant of the crime?"

"You are now," said Swanson, pertinently, "but I admit that you were not at the time. But, as I was saying, you are right in correcting me as to the crime not having been committed under this roof, and wrong in saying that the blow was struck underground."

"Dear me! Then where was my poor friend murdered?"

"Inspector Trusk will tell you," said the detective carelessly.

That officer raised his eyes from the letter, which he was studying profoundly. "I am not so sure that I can," he remarked.

"But that letter?" hinted Swanson impatiently, and with surprise. "It states plainly——"

"That Sir John Newby was to meet some unknown person in the Cuckoo's Grove about seven o'clock, and——"

Mr Clair interrupted in his turn. "Oh, but that's impossible," he said, decidedly. "I was near the Cuckoo's Grove about seven."

"But not on the stroke of seven," said Trusk, sharply.

"No. Then I was on my way to Mrs Folks's cottage. But this letter?"

"You can read it for yourself, sir," and Trusk passed along the torn paper. It was a single sheet of common ordinary writing paper, and on it was printed a few lines in neat handwriting. There was nothing characteristic about the caligraphy, and, indeed, the letters were rather printed than written—something betwixt and between, in fact.

"If Sir John Newby does not come to the Cuckoo's Grove, Beltan, Essex, at seven o'clock on Saturday evening, the eighteenth of July, it will be the worse for his brother Richard."

So ran the missive, and Clair looked up more puzzled than ever at this extraordinary message. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"Can you not guess?" inquired Swanson, rapidly, and before the inspector could open his mouth.

"Well," said Clair, glancing at the letter again (it was a single sheet, and the words were set down lengthways, without date or address), "it seems to me that some one—the person who wrote this letter, in fact—wished to meet Sir John at the Cuckoo's Grove at seven o'clock on the eighteenth of this month."

"You merely read what is set down," said Swanson, drily, "but who wrote, or rather who printed, that message?"

"I can't tell," said Clair, much annoyed. "How can you expect me to know who wrote it?"

"Because I understand from Mr. Hallon, who was with me searching the vault, that you are an intimate friend of Sir John Newby's—that is, you were, seeing that he is now dead."

"I am intimate—that is, as you truly say, I was intimate; but I cannot guess who wrote this."

"Humph!" The detective look disappointed, and Trusk broke in impatiently.

"What do you mean, Swanson?"

"Well," drawled the smart young man, brushing his tall silk hat with his arm, "whomsoever wrote that letter knew something detrimental to the character of Richard Newby. I thought that such a person might be known to Mr. Clair."

"No," said the old man after reflection, "I know of no one. And I am not aware myself that there is anything against the character of Mr. Richard Newby."

"Sir John was evidently aware of something, else he would not have kept that appointment," retorted Swanson. "I wish I could question Richard Newby himself, but he is missing also. Probably," conjectured the detective, "he thought it was better to make himself scarce, since, as that letter shews, he was undoubtedly in trouble."

A light footstep was heard, and the door opened quietly. Willy Minter entered carrying two objects,

and looking very serious. She laid before the trio a South African slouch hat and a long cruel-looking knife, with a black and red-banded handle.

"I found these," she said, deliberately, "in the Cuckoo's Grove."

"Ah!" said Swanson, delightedly, "then the murder *did* take place there!"

CHAPTER VI

THE discovery made by Miss Minter, and the evidence of the letter found in the crypt, proved beyond a doubt that Swanson was right in his conjecture. Sir John Newby had certainly been murdered in the Cuckoo's Grove, and, judging from the place where the articles were found in the brushwood, near the stile at the further end of the wood, where the path commenced its journey through meadowlands. It was Willy's mistrust of Mr Clair that had taken her to the grove, since he had stated in her hearing that he had been thereabouts on Saturday evening. What she found seemed, to her, to be irrefutable evidence that he had stabbed the millionaire, although she could not conceive how he had contrived to drag so heavy a body to Abbot Hurley's tower. Unless, of course, he had an accomplice, which was entirely impossible. There was no person whom she knew likely to have assisted Mr Clair in committing so heinous a crime, or in concealing the corpse—that is, of course, if he were guilty.

And of this Willv was by no means certain. Assuredly a vague thought lurked at the back of her mind, that in some place and at some time she had seen that queer, red-banded knife in Clair's hand. But not at the Manor had she beheld this. Where she had seen him holding it, or why he should grasp such a deadly weapon, she could not think. For Dorothy's sake, and because she could not be sure that her suspicions could be proved, she did not question her brother. Nor did she tell him, or any one else, her real reason for seeking the grove. All she explained to Trusk and Swanson was that, believing Sir John Newby might have taken the short cut, she had explored on the chance, of finding some

evidence connected with his disappearance. "And from the absence of the hat," said Willy, to clinch her argument, "Mr Hallon did not believe that Sir John was murdered in the vault."

Of course, the sensation caused by the murder was tremendous, both in London and in the provinces. Newby was a well-known figure in financial circles, and had been knighted for his philanthropic efforts in the slums. Moreover, the family legend of the Clairs, reproduced in the papers, appealed to fanciful people. Had Clair charged a fee for admission, those who came to view the tower and the grounds would have paid cheerfully, and the squire would have made a tidy sum. But the old gentleman was indignant at the intrusion of cheap trippers, and refused admission to one and all. Therefore, those who came in traps and charrs-à-banc, in motor-cars, and on bicycles, were compelled to look at the tower from the road, where it rose amongst the trees, and then repaired to the Beltan Inn, to discuss the legend and the murder over beer and tea. Also the Cuckoo's Grove became a shrine of such morbid pilgrimages, and the villagers reaped quite a harvest from the notoriety of the deed, which so troubled their squire and his family.

But, in spite of publicity and search and many questions, Swanson and Trusk were no nearer the truth than they had been at the outset. The ownership of the knife could not be traced, the motive for the crime could not be discovered, and there was nothing in Sir John's past likely to shew why he should thus have been done to death. Nothing could be more mysterious.

Swanson went to London and interviewed Mrs Broll, who was Newby's old nurse and house-keeper. But she could explain nothing, save that her master had gone as usual to his office on Saturday morning, and had intended to visit the Manor. The detective learnt that the deceased had left his office at two o'clock, and had gone down to Beltan by the five-fifteen train from Fenchurch Street. Previously he had sent a clerk to leave his portmanteau in the cloak-room, and again he had left that same portmanteau in charge of the railway authorities at Beltan when he

set forth, at half-past six, to walk to his doom in the Cuckoo's Grove. But Swanson could not learn what Newby had been doing between the hours of two and five-fifteen—that is, from the time he left his office in Kaffir Lane until the moment he came for his luggage to the Fenchurch Lane cloak-room.

Also Richard, who acted as his twin-brother's secretary, was missing, and at first apprehensions were entertained for his safety. But Mrs Broll was enabled to allay this alarm. Sir John, she stated, had sent his brother to Russia, on Saturday morning, on private business, but she could not give any address likely to find him. Nevertheless, Swanson telegraphed to the British Embassy at St Petersburg, in the hope of recalling Richard. The secretary could not be found, and there was nothing to do but to wait until he should come back of his own free will. As he was an important witness, and might be able to shed some light on the darkness, the detective was annoyed when the day of the inquest came without his appearing. Since Richard knew all about his brother's business, and all about his past life, it might be that he would be able to state, if Sir John was threatened by any one. As to the Anarchist theory, Swanson never gave that a thought. Millionaires were not done to death by red revolutionists in England, like Russian Grand Dukes.

The inquest took place at the Pigeon Inn, the principal public-house of Beldan, for Mr Clair positively declined to permit such a gruesome function to be held either in Abbot Hurley's Tower or under the sacred roof of the manor. Also, he insisted that his daughter and Lady Panwin should remain absent while the deliberations were going on. Nevertheless, when the squire went down to the village with Hallon and Billy Minter, who escorted his sister—one of the witnesses as having found the knife and the hat—the two women could no longer restrain their curiosity, and followed. They did not dare to enter the inn, and thus cross Clair's path, but lurked in the draper's shop opposite, pretending to purchase things they did not want, but really keeping a watchful eye on the public-house. Lady Panwin was especially anxious to hear the verdict,

and said as much to Dorothy as they walked towards the village. Her niece rather wondered at this anxiety, and hinted as much.

"My child," said Lady Panwin, crossly, and striding along like a grenadier, "it is natural that I should be anxious. It's a horrible thing to have an intimate friend murdered almost, as one might say, under one's roof. And you know how highly-strung your father is. I don't want him ill on my hands, and the inquest may upset him."

"I don't wonder," assented Dorothy, recalling her glimpse of the dead. "The whole thing is unpleasant, and we are all upset. But why should father be more upset than any one else?"

Lady Panwin stared straight before her, evidently determined to say as little as possible. "Your father has nerves, my dear, and—and—well, you will know some day."

"Know what?" Dorothy was puzzled by this hint and this reticence.

"Never mind, child. But if you marry——"

"Of course I shall. I intend to marry Percy Hallon."

"Your father will never agree to that," returned Lady Panwin, pursing up her hard mouth. "Mr Hallon is not rich, and it is necessary for you to marry a wealthy man, if the Manor is to be kept in the family."

"I don't care if it's kept in the family or not," retorted Dorothy, much annoyed. "Why should I sacrifice my happiness to a tumble-down old building? And whatever father may think of the Manor, auntie, you know it matters very little to you. I'm sure you'll help me to marry Percy," and she gave the elder lady's arm a squeeze.

"I don't want you to marry at all," said Lady Panwin, with something like regret in her ringing voice.

Dorothy opened her eyes very widely. "Why not?" she asked.

"I can't tell you just now."

"You were pleased that I should marry Sir John?"

"Never! Never!" cried her aunt, vehemently.

"Francis wanted you to become his wife for the sake

of the money. But I saw reasons why such a marriage should not take place. Francis over-ruled me. I am not easy to over-rule," added Lady Panwin, grimly, "but on this occasion I was forced to agree against my better judgment. However, Sir John is dead and will be buried to-morrow, so I hope, Dorothy, that you will dismiss all idea of marriage."

"Oh!" Dorothy looked blank. "And what about the Manor?"

"It will descend to you along with my money and your father's. You can live in it very comfortably."

"Yet you say that to keep it I must marry money."

"I said that, I know. All the same, I dare say it can be arranged that you can stop there as a single woman."

"I don't see why I should. I object to being an old maid."

"There are worse things, child: And—"

Lady Panwin broke off abruptly, and refused to speak further. Apparently there existed some very strong reason why she should declare herself against any possible marriage, as she loved Dorothy, and wished to see her happy. Lady Panwin's attitude towards this important question puzzled her niece.

"I think you might say why you object to my marrying Percy," she observed, in an injured tone.

"It's not Mr Hallon in particular that I object to," said Lady Panwin, walking very fast, "although, could you marry, I should like to see you make a better match. But I don't advise your marrying any one."

"But why—why—why?"

"Here we are at Winter's shop," said Lady Panwin, irrelevantly, and pointing to the window. "That's a pretty dress-material, Dorothy. I must ask the price."

She stepped inside the dark little shop, followed by the perplexed girl, and not one word more would she speak on the subject.

Needless to say, Dorothy, not seeing why she should, be condemned to celibacy, determined to keep on her engagement with Hallon, notwithstanding this opposition. Yet she was disappointed, as, knowing that her father would not approve, she had quite

counted on her aunt being willing to help, and could not understand Lady Panwin's attitude.

Opposite the draper's shop was the Pigeon Inn, and a crowd was collected round its doors. The old lady and her niece turned over dress patterns and looked at fashion plates, keeping all the time a close watch on the throng. Little Miss Winter, who owned the shop, and who knew all the gossip of the village, chattered on gaily about the murder, and detailed the various amounts of money which had been earned by various people from the notoriety of the crime. It was rumoured that Miss Clair was engaged—or, rather, had been—to the dead man, and the little milliner cast sidelong looks to see how she took the news. Miss Winter was secretly surprised that the young lady should be so calm.

"I suppose the truth will never be known, my lady," she chatted.

"Let us wait to hear what the jury say, Miss Winter."

"The jury can only go by the evidence," said Miss Winter, with a shrug. "And from what I hear there is no evidence. I wonder to whom the late Sir John will leave his money?"

"Really I don't know," said Lady Panwin, freezingly.

"Perhaps to his brother," went on Miss Winter, in no wise abashed. "They say Mr Richard Newby exactly resembled Sir John."

"So I believe, from my own eyesight, Miss Winter. But who told you?"

"Mrs Broll, my lady."

"Sir John's housekeeper," said Dorothy. "Is she here?"

"Yes, miss. She came down to the inquest, and has just gone across to give her evidence—that is, she went some time ago. She came in here to buy some mittens, and is coming back to take them away. She is a very chatty lady, and told me a lot."

"Lady!" echoed the stately old dame, her pride of blood flushing her cheeks. "Mrs Broll is a servant, formerly a nurse. She is now a housekeeper."

"So she told me, my lady," rejoined Miss Winter.

with great humility. "And she's got a friend with her, a handsome girl, only she's stone deaf, and near-sighted."

"Julia Flint, I expect," said Dorothy, looking at her aunt.

Lady Panwin took no notice. She did not approve of Miss Winter talking so freely, and certainly did not intend to lower herself so far as to gossip with a milliner. Although Lady Panwin was fond of pretending to democracy, she thought very highly of her birth and connections, and always kept those beneath her in their places. But Dorothy, being young and friendly, and having known Miss Winter from the time she—that is, Dorothy—could toddle, was not indisposed to hear what was going on. She would have continued the conversation, much to the secret displeasure of her stately aunt, but that Miss Winter, looking out of the doorway, started and announced that Mrs Broll was crossing the green on her return to the shop.

"I expect she's given her evidence," said Miss Winter, hurrying behind the counter to pack up the mittens, "and has come for these."

Mrs Broll was as small as Miss Winter herself, a dark morsel of a woman, as dry as a bone, and gnarled like a tree-trunk. She had dark eyes, which twinkled under overhanging brows, and a large mouth, displaying many teeth. Her hair was grey, and was twisted into a cast-iron knob at the back of her head. Strangely enough, seeing that her master was dead, she had arrayed herself in the gayest colours. Her dress was green, her jacket was fawn, and her gloves purple, perhaps as a token of Royal mourning. Also, she wore an old-fashioned Victorian bonnet, with ribbon under the chin; and this was a mixture of flowers and feathers and tulle, all of rainbow hues. But to shew that she did mourn for the dead, she had draped over her shoulders a black lace shawl, trimmed heavily with crape. The odd little figure, dressed in this strange and unsuitable fashion, minced into the shop with the air of a person who thinks that the eyes of the world are on her.

"Lady Panwin!" Mrs Broll threw up her purple-gloved hands and dropped a curtsey as though she

• was being presented to the Queen. "I hope I see you well, my lady. And Miss Clair—poor, dear young lady, who is broken-hearted, I am sure. What a dreadful crime, my lady! •Oh, your ladyship must indeed suffer."

"Why?" asked Lady Panwin, grimly, and looking disapprovingly at the rainbow raiment of the housekeeper.

"Such an old friend, my lady," minced Mrs Broll, clasping her hands, "and so devoted to Miss Clair here. Ah, well, wedding-bells give place to funeral tolls. And why not, since we know that all flesh is grass. Your ladyship knows Julia, my companion—a child of the slums, alas! and as deaf as the adders of Scripture, but a good girl, and devoted with me to works of charity, without which, as St Paul mentions, we are but tinkling cymbals."

Julia Flint was a handsome, tall, dark-browed girl, with a rather sullen face. She watched Dorothy closely, and with anything but an amiable expression. Quietly dressed, and very composed in manner, she looked ladylike and unobtrusive. As Mrs Broll had said, Julia came from the slums, and was a protégée of the housekeeper's. That queer old woman—Mrs Broll must have been far past sixty—indulged in slumming, and gave herself up to charitable works in her intervals of rest. She fed the hungry and clothed the naked, with the approval of her late master, more because she liked to play the part of Lady Bountiful than because she really felt for the poor. Julia helped her, and occupied the position of her companion in the Newby household. •Sir John was always kind to his old nurse, and her vagaries.

• "Yes," went on Mrs Broll, while Lady Panwin glowered. "I have suffered a great blow in the death of Sir John. But I am glad to say that I am bearing up. When he had gout last year, and gave no end of trouble, I bore up wonderful, as Julia can testify. And now he is gone like a dew-drop, and no one at the inquest can tell who has melted him. I speak in parables," ended Mrs Broll, pleasantly.

"Come here," said Lady Panwin, suddenly, and stalked out of the door abruptly. "Dorothy, speak to Julia."

"In the deaf and dumb 'alphabet,' miss, if you please," put in Mrs Broll, whose black eyes twinkled more than ever.

"I wish to speak to Mrs Broll," ended Lady Panwin, exactly as though the housekeeper had not opened her mouth. "Come here, Martha!" and she stalked into the hot sunshine.

Mrs Broll started and bridled. Lady Panwin had known her for many years, and took the liberty of such an acquaintance. But Mrs Broll was not pleased. She had a great idea of her own importance, and did not like to be thus set in her place before company. However, she had a wholesome dread of Lady Panwin's abrupt, masterful ways, and meekly followed her into the middle of the green. Here no one could overhear, and any one who approached could be discerned at once. It was a very safe place for a confidential conversation.

"Now then, Martha," said Lady Panwin, turning sharply on the ex-nurse, "what do you know about this murder?"

"Simply nothing, my lady," minced Mrs Broll, with aggravating politeness. "Sir John left on Saturday and came down to this place, where, as it seems, he met with his death. I don't know why he should have been thus untimely slain, but in the midst of life we are in——"

"There, there, you needn't improve the occasion, Martha," snapped Lady Panwin. "What about Richard?"

"He's in Russia, my lady."

"Humph! Richard was always your favourite."

"He was the best and loveliest child I ever nursed," said Mrs Broll, fervently.

"Seeing that Richard and John were twins, and that you couldn't tell one from the other, you must have nursed *two* lovely children."

"I don't deny that, my lady. They were two roses on one stalk. But Richard had a better disposition than John."

"Hoh!" Lady Panwin rubbed her nose vexedly. "Yet John did everything for you and Richard did nothing?"

"The mysterious dispensation of Providence per-

mitted John to acquire wealth and kept Richard poor," said Mrs Broll, piously.

"Rubbish! John was clever in the right way and worked; Richard was clever in the wrong way and loafed. You loved Richard because he was a scamp and did not like John, who was a good man."

"Richard was his own worst enemy," said Mrs Broll, flushing.

"I've heard that phrase before," retorted Lady Panwin. "It is always used about scamps. Richard would have gone to the dogs had not John made him his secretary. Now I'm going to ask you a very leading question, Martha, and if you tell me a lie I'll know, by the expression of your eyes. You can't deceive me, my good woman."

"I am a good woman," said Mrs Broll, hotly, "and I never tell lies. Oh! my lady, my lady, you misjudge me, indeed you do!"

"Pooh! You deceive yourself into thinking that you are an angel. I daresay you are a good average sort of creature, who looks after number one all right, but——"

"I beg your pardon, my lady, but I live for others."

"In the slums and out of them—especially out of them, when Richard is to be considered. Now then, Martha, answer my question. Did Richard kill John?"

"Mrs Broll threw up the purple gloves and gasped with horror. "Oh, my lady, what a wicked thing to say! Richard would not hurt a fly.""

"I daresay, because a fly's death would do him no good," said Lady Panwin, grimly. "But your answer?"

"Richard is in Russia. He did not kill John," snapped Mrs Broll.

"Did he employ any one to kill him?"

"No. John's death does not benefit Richard. John has not left any money to my poor boy. He told me so, because Richard vexed him."

"Hoh!" said Lady Panwin, and rubbed her nose again. "Then Richard must be innocent. All the same, I mistrust Richard, and——"

A shouting interrupted her, and a crowd of people

poured out of the door of the inn. Hallon appeared and walked across to Lady Panwin, when he caught sight of her.

"The verdict is wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," he called out.

CHAPTER VII

THE verdict was only what could be expected, since there was no evidence obtainable likely to even hint at the name of the assassin. Trusk and Swanson had done their best, but the mystery was too deep for even their official brains to unravel. Certainly Sir John had been seen to enter the Cuckoo's Grove somewhere about the hour of seven, and that was the last time he was beheld alive. That he had been stabbed in the wood was unquestionable, and the most extraordinary thing was that the body had been taken secretly to the vault under Abbot Hurley's Tower. The word secretly may be used advisedly, as no one had seen the removal of the corpse. Also, in spite of all inquiries, no one could say that any suspicious character had been seen in the vicinity. The end of the inquiry left the mystery of the death where it was.

Now that the inquest was over nothing remained but to bury the body, and to read the dead man's will. The corpse was taken to London immediately, and buried the next day in Kensal Green, and Mr Clair, with many other people, went to the funeral. Richard, who ought to have been chief mourner, was still abroad, and had given no sign of his existence. But, sooner or later—it depended upon the nature of the errand upon which Sir John had sent him—he would return, and then no doubt a reward would be offered for the defection of the murderer. Notwithstanding what Mrs Broll said, everyone expected that the millionaire would leave his large fortune to his twin brother, since he had no other relation, and had always been fond of Richard. But perhaps the fondness might not go so far as to entrust such a scamp as Richard had the reputation of being with a

large fortune. In the hands of the surviving twin, the hard-earned gold of Sir John might prove a curse to its new possessor.

Down at Beltan excitement waned with the giving of the verdict and the removal of the corpse to its resting-place in Kensal Green. People still talked more or less, and suggested reasons why the millionaire should have been murdered, but gradually began to look upon the crime as one of those mysteries which would never be solved until the Day of Judgment. Yet the Cuckoo's Grove was invested with a sinister reputation by reason of the murder, and lovers who formerly used to haunt it on summer nights no longer went there. As to the vault, it was locked up again, and the key was restored to the niche. Trusk pointed out to Mr Clair that this should be done, as the presence of the key might prove a trap for the assassin. It might be that the murderer, knowing the way to the vault, might return there again, and, finding the key, might re-enter, in which case he would certainly fall into the hands of the police. To provide against this contingency, Trusk directed the rural constable to hover round Abbot Hurley's Tower at odd times, by night and by day. Mr Clair consented unwillingly to this arrangement, and the inmates of the Manor still felt the influence of the crime hanging over the house, since the presence of Hobson constantly reminded them that such a tragedy had taken place.

Hallon went up to town with Mr Clair for the funeral, but the next day he returned to the Minters' cottage. He was an intimate friend of the young couple, and came and went at will. Indeed, Billy had once or twice jokingly proposed that Willy should marry him; but the girl sternly refused. She was determined to remain a spinster; and, moreover, knew that Percy loved Dorothy, which put any marriage with her out of the question. When Billy learnt that his friend was an accepted lover of the pretty Dorothy, he congratulated him with marked envy.

"Of course, I wish you luck and all that sort of thing," said Billy, over his after-five-o'clock tea pipe. "But I wish I was the lucky man."

"You pay a great compliment to my taste," said

Hallon, gravely. "But I didn't know that you were in the field."

"I have been for a long time," said Billy, with a huge sigh. "But Willy objected to my taking a partner. She wants us to be bachelors all our days."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear chap! Willy is sure to meet the right man sooner or later, and then you will be free to make some delightful girl Mrs Minter. I'll dance at your wedding some day."

"Huh! It seems that I'll have to dance at yours first. Mighty hard lines, seeing I'm in love with the bride."

Hallon laughed. Billy's affection was but skin-deep; and he was one of those inflammable young men who fell in love regularly, once a month, with any pretty girl who happened to be at hand. "I'll trust you," he said, smiling. "Come to the wedding by all means."

"If it ever takes place," said Billy, shaking his young head. "Love won't run smooth in your case, you know. Old Clair wants Dolly to marry money."

"I have enough for us to live on, Billy."

"I daresay, and, you're a rattling good sportsman into the bargain; but Mr Clair wanted thousands."

"He may get them—from Sir John Newby's estate"

Billy started: "What makes you think that, Percy?"

"Oh, I have no reason to think so. It is simply a guess on my part."

"Your guess may prove to be truth," said Billy, thoughtfully. "After all, Newby and Clair were very thick; so out of his millions that poor chap might leave Clair a good income. I'm sure I hope so, as it's hard lines on an old family to come down in the world. And if Mr Clair does get money," ended Billy, screwing up his face, "I hope he'll give us better dinners. Oh, my soul, how I have starved at those feasts!"

"I never bothered about the food there."

"Because you lived on love."

"And still live on it," said Hallon, rising and stretching himself. "Well, I'm off to the Manor. While the cat's away the mice may play."

"Can't I come and play also?" asked Billy, ruefully.

"Certainly not! Much as I esteem you, I prefer to be alone with Doróthy. Two's company, and three's a nuisance."

"Well," said Billy, sighing, "you're a lucky bargee. I'll take out the car for a spin. And, I say, bring Willy back in time for dinner. She's always late. She's at the Manor, with Doffy."

"Oh, Willy is discreet enough to make herself scarce," said Hallon, lightly, and strolled to the gate, looking very smart in his white flannels and Panama hat. Billy followed rapidly.

"I say, Percy, one moment," he said, letting his friend out, and then leaning over the gate, "do you think any one in the Manor murdered that poor chap?"

"No! Why do you think so?" asked Percy, quickly.

"Well, the plan of the catacombs under the tower was torn out of the book, you know," said Billy, thoughtfully. "Some one in the house must have done that."

"I don't see it. A visitor may have committed the vandalism. Clair often has archaeological people down to see the house and the tower; and those gentry are not scrupulous in annexing anything of that sort. They are as bad as stamp collectors. I wouldn't leave a stamp maniac alone with a collection for worlds. He'd steal for sure."

"Daresay," said Billy laconically, "but he wouldn't steal a plan without an object—the catacomb plan I mean. I'll bet you what you like, Percy, that the chap who annexed that plan murdered Newby."

"Perhaps," said Hallon, thoughtfully. "It is certainly strange that the plan should be missing; yet Mr Clair cannot think who could have stolen it."

"Oh, a pompous old ass, such as Clair is, never thinks of possibilities, Percy," said Billy, irreverently. "I wonder if Willy knows anything about that missing plan."

"Why, what the deuce do you mean?" asked Hallon, wheeling suddenly.

• "Well, Willy • has something on her mind connected with the murder, and she won't tell me what it is. Remember she found the knife and the hat in the Grove. Why should she?"

"I don't know if you're off your head, Billy," said Percy, sternly, "but you seem to infer that your sister is mixed up in the matter."

"Nothing of the sort," cried Billy, furiously; "how you do catch a chap up. I only say that Willy's such a sharp girl, that she may have stumbled on some evidence likely to shew who stole the plan. If she has, probably, that is what took her to the Cuckoo's Grove. She knows something," said Billy, decisively, "I'm certain. I've asked her again and again, but she always tells me to shut up."

"Then I'll ask her," said Hallon, firmly. "If Willy knows anything likely to elucidate this mystery, she must speak. Hullo, here she comes!"

It was indeed Miss Minter who walked rapidly down the lane where the cottage was situated. She looked healthy and pretty, and came on with her usual firm stride; yet Hallon noted, as she drew near, that her brows were wrinkled with thought, and that she appeared worried.

"I say," he remarked, when she reached the gate, "here's Billy saying that you know something about this murder."

"Billy's an ass," said Miss Minter, briefly, and removed her straw hat to fan her hot face.

"Yes, you do," insisted her brother. "I believe you know who took that plan of the catacombs."

"Perhaps you accuse me?" said Willy, scornfully.

"Huh! Who's the ass now? But you do know something. Tell it to Percy, here, and help him to marry Dorothy."

"How would my telling him of my suspicions help?"

"Oh," said Hallon, all on the alert, "then you do suspect some one?"

"Well, yes," said Willy, slowly, "although I have no reasonable grounds for such a suspicion. But how will my telling you help the marriage?"

"Well, you see," explained Hallon, knowing what was in Billy's mind, "Mr Clair naturally wants to

know who killed his friend. He will not be over-pleased at my proposing to Dorothy, and may make objections—in fact, I am sure that he will. If I help him to discover the truth about this crime, he may let me marry his daughter.”

Miss Minter looked from one young man to the other, and then at the pretty cottage, where the climbing red roses blushed in the sunshine.

“Billy,” she said suddenly, “swear you’ll hold your tongue.”

“I swear!” said Billy, gruffly. “What’s up?”

“And swear,” added his sister, turning to Hallon, “that you will not be angry with what I am about to say.”

“I swear!” said Hallon, promptly and uneasily. She seemed to be so much in earnest that he felt nervous.

“I don’t know if my telling you of my suspicions will help,” said Willy deliberately, “but I have an idea that Mr Clair knows the——”

“Oh,” Hallon interrupted her fiercely, “that’s absurd.”

“Perhaps it is,” said Willy, composedly, and related the grounds upon which she suspected Clair. “And that was why I went to the Grove,” she ended, triumphantly.

“It’s all bosh!” cried her brother, vehemently; “and it doesn’t explain who stole the plan.”

“Mr Clair may have torn it out himself,” said Willy quickly, “in order to prevent any discovery of the vault, where he hid the body. Percy, what do you think?”

“I can’t give an opinion yet,” said Hallon, slowly. “Of course, Clair was absent from the Manor about the time of the murder, and he was near the Grove by his own confession. But there is no apparent reason why he should murder Sir John. Also, it is ridiculous to think that a gentleman like Mr Clair would condescend to vulgar murder.”

“And then, of course, he could not have brought the body to the vault alone,” said Billy, disdainfully.

“I thought of that myself,” cried Willy, sharply. “I daresay that I am making a mountain out of a mole-hill. All the same, Mr Clair’s movements on

that might be mysterious. And then, again, Lady Panwin is very nervous about him."

"I remember that," said Hallon suddenly, as he recollected the behaviour of the old lady when the murder was announced, and also the collapse of Mr Clair. "She looked at that picture over the piano—that Georgian soldier—an ancestor I suppose."

"What has that to do with what we are talking about?" asked Billy, crossly.

"Nothing, I suppose, and yet it seems all of a piece. I'll have a talk with Lady Panwin when I go up, and ask some leading questions."

"About what?"

"I hardly know as yet," said Hallon, somewhat puzzled.

"Ask her why she does not want you to marry Dorothy," said Willy, pointedly.

"What?" cried Percy angrily, and with great amazement.

"Yes, Dorothy told me. She doesn't want Dorothy to marry any one."

"Oh!" Hallon clenched his hands, and thought. Then suddenly, and without a word of farewell, he wheeled and fairly ran up the lane.

"What's up now?" asked Billy, startled by this move.

"There's going to be trouble at the Manor," said Willy, wearily. "I wish I hadn't spoken now, but I have, so there's nothing left for it but to allow Percy to do what he likes. And mind you hold your tongue, Billy. I don't want the detectives down here."

"But do you really believe that Mr Clair murdered Sir John?" asked the young man, in an awed voice.

"Oh, don't bother me! You know all that I know. Think for yourself."

Meanwhile, Hallon was speeding up the road in the direction of the Manor. On the face of it, he could not believe that Clair was guilty, and yet Lady Panwin seemed to be anxious about him. Was it because she suspected, or perhaps knew, that he had killed Newby that she urged Dorothy not to marry? Here was another mystery, but one which Hallon was resolved to fathom by direct questions.

He soon arrived at the Manor, and rang the bell. Jules, looking more meek and mild than ever, appeared and shewed him into the drawing-room. Lady Panwin was seated on the sofa tating as usual, and looked anxious. She started when Hallon entered the room abruptly, and spoke angrily.

"The younger generation have no manners," said Lady Panwin, wrathfully. "How dare you enter like a bull into a china shop."

"I beg your pardon," said Hallon, politely, "but I am worried, and manners are apt to go when one is worried."

"What is the matter?" asked Lady Panwin, sharply. "Have you and Dorothy quarrelled? All the better—it will make the parting easier. You understand, Mr Hallon?"

"I understand that you don't wish me to marry Dorothy," said the young man, gravely. "Willy Minter has just told me."

"And who told her?"

"Dorothy herself. I have come to ask why you object to me?"

"You are not sufficiently rich, you have no position," said Lady Panwin, sternly; but she dropped her work and glanced again at the portrait above the piano.

"Hallon's eyes followed her gaze, and he shook his head. "You are playing with me," he said, slowly. "I would rather know the truth."

"You are not a suitable husband for my niece."

"That is not the reason. Willy told me, as Dorothy informed her, that you don't wish any marriage with any man."

"It is true," said Lady Panwin, almost inaudibly.

"And your reason," said Hallon, venturing to make a stray shot, "is connected with that portrait."

The old woman started up with an agitated face. "What nonsense are you talking?" she asked, sternly. "Why should that portrait influence me with regard to your preposterous engagement to my niece?"

"You looked at it just now when you made excuses," said Hallon, promptly, "and you looked

at it on the night when I announced the murder and Mr Clair nearly fainted."

"Oh, hush! Oh, hush!" she cried, and moved swiftly to the door. This she opened and listened, then closed it again. "I hear the sound of carriage wheels," she said, returning more composed. "My brother is probably coming back. Go, before he arrives."

"Not until I know why you don't want Dorothy to marry me."

"She shall not marry you, nor any man. There is a reason."

"What if I guess the reason?"

"You cannot," murmured Lady Panwin, very white and very determined.

"I believe I do," said Hallon, slowly, and staring at her between the eyes, so as to dominate her with his will. "You fear lest your brother should know something about the murder."

"I do not! I do not!" panted Lady Panwin, and glanced towards the near window, through which could be seen a fly stopping at the door. "It's not that. Go! Go! I beg of you to go before Francis comes."

"No! I shall stop and ask him to explain."

Lady Panwin sprang forward and caught him by the arm. "Then you must know—you shall know. I am ready to tell you. That portrait"—she pointed to the Georgian soldier—"is my great-grandfather. He was a lunatic—he died in Bedlam. There is insanity in the Clair family, and if you marry my niece you will transmit it to your children."

"Oh!" Hallon was suddenly enlightened; "then when your brother was so upset that night you dreaded lest he should have gone mad and have killed Sir John."

"You have no right to say that—you have no right."

"Lady Panwin, be plain with me," said Percy, greatly agitated. "You know that I love your niece, that I am a true friend."

"If you are—if you are, hold your tongue. Say nothing of what I have just said to you." She shook him in her excitement.

"No, I shall not," agreed Hallon, soothingly; "but be plain. Did——"

"He did not—he could not. His brain is weak, but he would never, he would never—oh!" she broke off, "why should he, when he had no motive to commit so dastardly a crime."

Voices were heard in the hall, and with an imploring gesture Lady Panwin pointed to the window. Hallon ran to it, and slipped on to the terrace. The next moment he heard Clair's voice raised in excited tones as he entered the drawing-room.

"Selina! Selina! I inherit two thousand a year by Newby's will."

CHAPTER VIII

HALLON walked swiftly down the avenue, with the excited words of Mr Clair ringing in his ears. Lady Panwin had asked what motive her brother could have to murder the millionaire—always presuming that he was guilty, which was not yet wholly proven—and the man himself had replied to the question, unknowingly. And Percy asked it now of himself: Would Mr Clair assassinate his best friend to obtain two thousand a year? It was impossible to obtain an answer.

The young man now saw very plainly the reason for Lady Panwin's fears. If, as she insisted, there was insanity in the family, inherited through the Georgian great-grandfather, it might be that the same had shewn itself in the present head. A homicidal mania might have induced him to murder Newby; but if this were granted, what became of the monetary motive? Either Clair had committed the deed in a moment of frenzy, or he had deliberately planned the crime for a certain consideration, which was explained by the inherited income.

As to the first of these theories, an unexpected homicidal attack would come on, without premeditation, in which case Clair assuredly would not have been possessed of the knife at the moment. In fact, if he believed himself to be the victim of such a frenzy, he would refrain from carrying any lethal instrument, especially such a deadly-looking weapon as that with which the crime had been committed. In dealing with the second, Hallon reflected that if Clair had deliberately intended to murder Newby he could easily have lured him into the vault, there to fulfil his purpose. That would have been both sensible and safer. But Sir John had been stabbed

in the Cuckoo's Grove, and his body—a remarkably heavy one—had been dragged to the vault, at the risk of discovery. A man advisedly intending murder would not have behaved in so rash a manner. Also, Mr Clair was far too frail a man to carry the corpse all that distance. Looking at one theory and at the other, Hallon finally dismissed them both. Clair, he truly believed, and, in the face of circumstantial evidence, was absolutely innocent. Lady Panwin's fears and Willy Minter's doubts were all moonshine.

Having come to this reasonable conclusion, Hallon rid his thoughts of the subject, and turned to consider how he was to overcome Lady Panwin's opposition to his marriage with Dorothy. Clair certainly would be against the match, and now that he was about to receive two thousand a year would be more bent than ever on his daughter marrying some influential man, likely to benefit the fortunes of the reduced Clairs. Hallon knew that he could satisfy the old gentleman on the score of pedigree, since he came of aristocratic stock, and there were but two lives between himself and a baronetcy. But he assuredly was not rich, and was forced to earn his living, so it was probable—as Billy prophesied—that the course of true love would not run very smoothly. But Lady Panwin influenced her brother so greatly that if she could be brought to countenance the match, Mr Clair might be induced to agree. But to enlist the sympathy and help of Lady Panwin it was necessary to meet her on this burning question of inherited insanity.

It had never struck Hallon that Clair was insane, although he considered him weak and pompous and fussy about trifles. And Dorothy herself was singularly cool-headed and self-controlled. Lady Panwin's theory seemed to be ridiculous. Yet, as Hallon knew, insanity might shew itself later in life if it lurked in the family, and he shuddered at the idea of marrying into such a decadent race. Much as he loved Dorothy, if he could be certain that her aunt spoke the truth he was prepared to give her up, and pass the remainder of his life in a state of single blessedness. But the statement had yet to be proved true, and Percy resolved to so prove it. There must

be amongst the family papers, he thought, some record of the unfortunate Georgian soldier who had died in Bedlam, and could he get access to them he might learn the reason for the lunacy.

Then it occurred to him that Willy Minter had literary ambitions, and had frequently stated her determination to write a novel dealing with the legendary lore of the Clair family. The squire had rather liked the idea, as advertising the antiquity of his race, and therefore had helped Willy to gather material from documents, and letters and portraits and heirlooms. In her researches, as Hallon argued, the girl probably had come across the case of the lunatic great-grandfather, so a few questions to her might reveal some clue which would vanquish the opposition of Lady Panwin. Unfortunately, Hallon could not question Willy straightly, as he had passed his word not to speak of the subject of insanity to any one. However, he believed that with the aid of diplomatic fencing he might be enabled to pump Willy of information on this point, and set to work after dinner, when they were having coffee and cigarettes in the tiny drawing-room of the cottage.

Throughout the meal both brother and sister had asked Hallon questions about Lady Panwin's attitude when he had called, and as to his belief, or disbelief, in Clair's guilt. To the first question Hallon had artfully replied that Lady Panwin wanted to keep Dorothy as her companion, and merely acted from a selfish motive. To the second he answered that he could not come to any conclusion on the evidence before him. "I shall have to know more," explained Hallon, ending the subject, "before I make up my mind."

Then, while sipping his coffee and watching the blue smoke-rings curling from Willy's lips, the young man hinted at the novel, and asked how it was getting on.

"I haven't written a line for weeks," said Willy, candidly. "My ideas won't come. I don't know what to set down."

"But you have plenty of material," urged Hallon, surprised. "Why not tell the legend of Abbot Hurley's tower?"

"Yes," said Billy, who was lounging in a deep armchair, looking lazy and comfortable. "I told her she ought to write about the Devil's Ace and the game which gave the monastery to Amyas Clair. Also, she might describe Abbot Hurley's revenge."

"Oh!" said Hallon, curiously, "I never heard of any revenge"

"Abbot Hurley hid the treasures of the monastery when he lost the place," explained Willy. "Somewhere in the neighbourhood there is a rich treasure hidden—church plate and crosses and chalices and pyx and jewels and gold and—"

"Stop! Stop!" interrupted Hallon, while Willy paused for lack of breath; "you make my mouth water. It's like describing the plunder of a Spanish galleon in the good old buccaneering days. Is there no document to shew where this wealth is concealed?"

"No," said Billy, regretfully. "Abbot Hurley was too clever for that. He simply hid the plate by night and bolted with his monks—so the document says. Amyas Clair and several of his descendants have searched again and again, but without success. Could Mr Clair find that treasure it would make him wealthy."

"I don't think so," said Willy, calmly; "the plate would have to be returned to the church it belonged to."

Billy winked. "You bet," said he, emphatically, "and Mr Clair is the abbot of the monastery now. Lay down your yarn on those lines."

"And might I suggest," said Hallon, still bent upon learning what he greatly desired to know, "that you might make Amyas Clair go mad, when he could not find the treasure. It would only be justice, seeing that he won by the Devil's Ace. But I suppose," he added, artfully, "that there is no madness in the Clair family."

"General Clair was mad," said Willy, unexpectedly, and there she was striking the very trail Percy wished to follow. "You know that portrait over the piano in the drawing-room—the soldier? He was one of George III's Generals. Your remark to-day about Lady Panwin glancing at

that portrait set me thinking about him. I wonder," added Willy, meditatively, and almost chancing on the right explanation, "if Lady Panwin thought that Mr Clair was going mad when he nearly fainted, and recalled General Harry Clair's madness."

"Perhaps," said Hallon, with outward calmness, but inwardly excited. "I suppose she thought that the lunacy might be hereditary."

Willy thrust out her chin. "Oh, nonsense!" she cried, glibly. "Why, General Harry went mad through sunstroke in India."

"Oh!" Hallon's heart gave a leap as the mists seemed to clear away, "then there is no chance of insanity being in the blood?"

"Not in the least. There was a local cause for the man's going off his head. He died in Bedlam, poor soul. I read it all in some letters addressed to his son. Lady Panwin must be silly to think that Mr Clair was going mad."

"You suggested that," hinted Billy, anticipating Percy.

"Because Lady Panwin looked at the portrait of the General. But Mr Clair was only upset by the news of the death."

"Or his conscience smote him," said Billy, yawning.

"Oh, rubbish!" cried Hallon, testily. "Don't be talking of that again, you silly ass! There is absolutely no reason to believe that Mr Clair is guilty."

"But the circumstantial evidence——"

"Many a man who was innocent has been hanged upon such evidence. I want greater proof of Clair's guilt than what Willy says."

"I say nothing," flashed out Miss Minter, angrily. "I had my suspicions, but I was never certain that Mr Clair was guilty. Only to you and Billy have I mentioned what I thought. I don't intend to talk on the subject again," she ended, decisively.

"You will be wise, my dear girl. But with regard to your novel, it seems to me that with the General's madness and the hidden treasure and that infernal game of cards, you have plenty of material to build up a first-class story."

And then Hallon went on to suggest the lines upon which Willy's proposed novel should be laid down. He did this to avert suspicion as to his real aim in asking questions, and introducing the subject. But his heart was light within him that night when he retired to bed. He could now prove to Lady Panwin—with the assistance of a doctor, if needs be—that there was no chance of the merely local insanity of the Georgian General being inherited by his descendants. From the taint both Dorothy and her father were free, and the first could marry him, while the second could be proved innocent of the homicidal mania which Lady Panwin unwillingly suspected. Of course, there remained the fact that, if guilty, Francis Clair had planned the crime in cold blood; but Hallon had already argued out that theory, and judged Clair to be innocent. Therefore he fell asleep with a smile on his lips and peace in his heart.

CHAPTER IX

THE next morning he refused to go in the motor-car with his young hosts for a spin, and when he saw them disappearing down the Axleigh Road in a cloud of dust he strolled quietly up to the Manor. He desired to see Lady Panwin, and to explain that there was absolutely no reason why Dorothy should be condemned to spinsterhood. If she—the elder woman—were only convinced of this, she might, out of sheer gratitude for such information, be willing to persuade Mr Glan into consenting. Then everything would go well.

It was a delightful summer morning, all sunshine and perfume and radiant life, quite the sort of happy day to choose for courting. Hallon anticipated being with Dorothy in the quaint Dutch Garden near the tower, talking about his future and hers. But when he emerged from the avenue he found that there was another Richmond in the field. That is, Dorothy, who was strolling on the lawn, with a scarlet sunshade over her uncovered head, had a young man walking by her side. And such a handsome man—tall, slim, and graceful, with quick blue eyes, and curly yellow hair. The face, which turned towards Hallon, was oval, fair, and cleanshaven, save for a small golden moustache. This Apollo, of whom, at first sight, the lover felt jealous, was dressed in blue serge, with smart brown boots and a straw hat. He looked extremely English and aristocratic; yet when Hallon came up Dorothy introduced her cavalier as a foreigner.

"Count Bezkoﬀ—Mr Hallon," said Dorothy, with flushed cheeks, as she saw the jealousy in her lover's dark eyes.

"I am happy to meet you, Mr Hallon." Count

Bezkoﬀ spoke wonderful English, with scarcely a trace of foreign accent. What with his fair looks, his Bond Street clothes, and his accurate Saxon, he did not seem to be a Russian. But the way in which he clicked his heels together and bowed stiffly from the waist hinted at the alien.

Hallon removed his Panama gravely, and nodded in polite silence, then turned towards Miss Clair.

"How is your father?" he asked, quietly.

"He is in very good spirits," she answered, composedly. "Good fortune has come his way at last."

"Then our visit to the vault *did* change the luck?" said Hallon, pretending not to know the news.

Dorothy trembled a little as the memory of the crypt and its tragedy crossed her mind. But she recovered herself immediately, and the quicker when she saw that Bezkoﬀ was watching her curiously.

"I think it has changed the luck for the better. Poor Sir John Newby has left my father two thousand a year for life."

"I congratulate Mr Clair. He will be enabled to restore the Manor to its former splendour."

"And help the good cause also, I hope," struck in Bezkoﬀ.

"I beg your pardon!" said Hallon, in puzzled tones.

"Ah! I forgot," rattled on the Count, gaily. "You are not aware that I am a Red Revolutionist, an Anarchist, a Socialist, a Nihilist—in fact, all that is bad in your English eyes. I was an intimate friend of Sir John's, and had he lived it was his intention to help the party I belonged to with money. We need money to carry on our war against the tyrants at St Petersburg, Mr Hallon. Sir John's millions would have come in very handy, I assure you."

"No doubt," agreed Percy, drily. "But Mr Clair is not in possession of Sir John's millions. Nor do I think that he has much sympathy with the views which you entertain regarding a new era for Russia."

Bezkoﬀ laughed in a boyish manner. "Right in both cases, Mr Hallon. With your solid English

sense, you have stated the position correctly. Sir John's millions, with the exception of a few legacies, and this income to Mr Clair, have gone to charitable societies, with which, as an Anarchist, I have small sympathy. But two thousand a year can do much, if properly spent."

"I scarcely think Mr Clair will spend it in Russia, Count."

"Oh, yes—that is, when I have had a talk with him. You must not take my talk of Anarchism and Nihilism too seriously, Mr Hallon. I merely use those terms because the aims of truly patriotic Russians are inconceivable to your countrymen, and perhaps to you, unless they are so ticketed. I hope for a bloodless revolution myself."

"There are no bloodless revolutions," said Hallon, briefly.

"I fear you do not read the history of your own country, Mr Hallon, or you would remember the revolution which drove James II. into exile. There are other instances upon which we can talk later. And all revolutions, whether bloodless or otherwise, require money. I have every hope that Mr Clair will aid our cause."

Percy looked at Dorothy in a puzzled manner. This sudden and unexpected intrusion of Continental politics into the quiet, uneventful life of Beltan made him wonder. Nor did he think that pompous, aristocratic Mr Clair was the man to lend himself to Russian emissaries, or his money either. Dorothy, who also looked surprised, answered his unspoken question at once.

"Count Bezkoﬀ's arrival and news is quite as unexpected to me as to you," she said. "He came down with my father last night, and proposes to stop here for a few days."

"Not as an unwelcome guest, I trust, Miss Clair," said the Count, in a graceful manner. "I am the last person, I hope, to intrude anywhere. But I was present at the reading of Sir John's will in London, in the hope that he had left a few thousands to the society that I represent in England, and so I met with your father. I confided to him my disappointment at Sir John's oversight, and explained my

views. Mr Clair, was so far converted to the desirability of helping us that he invited me down for a few days. When he fully understands our aims towards regenerating Russia, I have no doubt that he will give us some money. You see," ended Bezkoﬀ, turning towards Hallon with a dazzling smile, "that I conceal nothing. Yet you English say that we Russians are all secrecy and intrigue."

"I say nothing about the Russians," said Hallon, coldly, "because I know nothing of the country, or of the people."

"I can instruct you," said the Count, quickly.

"It would be waste of time. I have very little money, and certainly none to spend upon revolutions."

Bezkoﬀ was in no wise offended; he simply shrugged his shoulders and laughed gaily. "You are wise, you English. You look before you leap!"

"And you Russians," retorted Hallon, promptly, "leap before you look."

"Naturally, with bayonets driving us," answered the Count.

The two men seemed to be on the verge of a quarrel, and Dorothy intervened. "You had better discuss your views with my father, Count," she said, quickly, "since it is my father that you have come down to see."

Bezkoﬀ, with the swift intuition of the Slav, glanced rapidly from one young face to the other, and drew his own conclusions. With a smile, but in silence he was about to move away and leave the lovers to a desired solitude of two, when Hallon stopped him.

"One moment, Count," he said, abruptly, "has Richard Newby's secret visit to St Petersburg anything to do with your revolution?"

"Certainly. Sir John sent him to Russia at my request. When he returns, Mr Hallon, the mystery of Sir John's death will doubtless be solved.

"Then you think—you know——"

"Nothing, Mr Hallon. But Mr Richard Newby is better informed."

When the Russian withdrew Hallon and Dorothy

looked at one another for a minute without speaking. It was the girl who spoke first.

"What does he mean?" she asked, shifting the sunshade from one shoulder to the other.

Hallon shrugged his shoulders. "Really, I can't say," he returned. "Unless he means to hint that Richard had something to do with the crime; and that, on the face of it, is ridiculous. Besides, I don't see how Count Bezkoﬀ can possibly know."

Dorothy thought for a moment, drawing patterns on the gravelled path with the tip of her shoe. "It is strange that Count Bezkoﬀ should come down here with my father," she observed.

"I quite agree with you. But, after all, it is your father's business, and doesn't concern us in the least. What does your aunt say?"

"Nothing. She accepts his presence in silence."

"And your father?"

"He has volunteered no explanation."

"Then we had better wait developments. I cannot think that your father would be foolish enough to lend himself to this man's wild schemes. I am puzzled."

The girl took his arm coaxingly, and led him down the path into a more secluded part of the gardens.

"Don't puzzle just now," she said. "Let us enjoy the golden moments together."

"My darling!" His arms went round her fondly.

"Then you do love me a little, Dorothy?"

"I love you a very great deal," she whispered, with the sweetest of blushes and the most delightful of trusting smiles.

What could he do but kiss her? Which he did in the eye of the all-beholding sun.

Then they sat down on a moss-grown stone bench, under the shadow of a marble fann, who danced on a low pedestal. Round them spread the trees in the full glory of summer foliage, beneath their feet the emerald sward, and overhead the cloudless sky of midsummer. Then everywhere, amongst the trees and on the borders of the lawn, and round the pedestal of the fann, bloomed roses, red and white, perfuming the air with fragrance. It was like the garden of Paradise, and they were Adam and Eve

in the midst thereof. Fortunately, the serpent, in the person of Count Bezkoﬀ, had gone away. The two talked low, because they talked of love, and there were frequent moments of silence, more eloquent than speech. Neither the one nor the other thought of the changed fortunes of the Clairs, or of the murder which had so changed those same fortunes, or of the obstacles which might prevent their marriage, or of any mundane things whatsoever. They gave themselves up to the full enjoyment of that golden hour, and Percy found himself saying things which hitherto he had thought existed only in love stories. And Dorothy listened with charmed ears. But as the sun soared higher and grew warmer they were compelled to descend from these transcendental heights and talk common sense, which was not nearly so nice.

"I hope everything will go well," sighed Dorothy, coming first to the practical; after the manner of women, however romantic.

"Of course they will, dearest. Why should they go wrong?"

"My father will object to our marriage, I know."

"He may; I don't deny that. But Lady Panwin will be on our side."

"No, she won't! On the day of the inquest she said that she did not wish me to marry you or any one else. I wonder why?"

"I know, for she told me," said Hallon. Now that he knew the truth he judged it best to tell Dorothy everything, so that she might co-operate with him to overcome the prejudices of Lady Panwin. "Your aunt told me that the original of the portrait over the piano——"

"General Harry Clair. Yes?" interpolated the girl.

"Had died in Bedlam."

"Yes, I know," said Dorothy, unexpectedly. "I found some old letters one day and shewed them to Willy. He suffered from sunstroke."

"Has your aunt seen those letters?"

"I don't think so. They were hidden in the secret drawer of an old escritoire. We found them on a rainy day, when we were hunting for some dresses in one of the attics. Why?"

"Well, you see, dear, Lady Panwin thinks that such insanity may be hereditary, and so did not want you to marry."

"Oh!" Dorothy turned pale. "Surely she is wrong."

"Quite wrong," Hallon hastened to assure her. "And I——"

"Why am I wrong?" inquired a stern voice behind the pedestal; and the lovers started to their feet to see Lady Panwin, gaunt and grave, in her black dress. She looked like a blot of ink in the sunshine.

"Oh, auntie!" faltered Dorothy, confused at being found with Percy's arm round her waist.

"I have been looking for you, Dorothy," said Lady Panwin, with the air of a judge condemning a culprit. "Go in and see about the flowers for the dinner-table to-night."

"No," said Hallon, detaining the girl when she would have obeyed. "I have something to say first about our engagement."

"You are not engaged," said Lady Panwin, fiercely. "You never shall be engaged. I warned you last night. Go, Dorothy! I shall speak to Mr Hallon privately."

"Go, dear," said Percy, fondly, and actually kissed her under the Gorgon gaze of this terrible chaperon; "and don't worry your head. We are engaged, and no one can part us."

CHAPTER X

LADY PANWIN put up her lorgnette as Dorothy ran across the lawn and disappeared round a curve of the path.

"I think you are mistaken, Mr Hallon," she said, glaring. "Also, you have taken a great liberty."

"It is the privilege of a lover to take liberties," said Hallon, in gay tones. "Come, Lady Panwin, don't look so angry. You have been young yourself, and know what love is."

The stately old dame softened, as she eyed the young man standing so gallant and debonair in the radiance of the sunshine. In spite of herself she felt her thin lips curve to smile.

"You are very bold, Mr Hallon," she remarked, striving to be stern.

"Naturally. Who would not be, to win such an angel?"

"You shall never win her, sir!"

"It's too late to say that. I have won her. We shall be married as soon as possible."

"Her father will have something to say to that," said the old lady, in her most freezing tones.

"I look to you to persuade Mr Clair to consent."

"You look to me?" gasped Lady Panwin, confounded by this audacity; "when you know that I don't want Dorothy to marry any one. Let the race of the Clairs die out, Mr Hallon. You know the taint, and——"

"There is no taint," said Hallon, quickly.

"But there is. I have seen letters about——"

"You have seen some letters, but not those which Willy Minter and Dorothy found in the old escritoire in the garret."

"Did they find letters there?" asked Lady Panwin, starting.

"Yes. Letters which dealt with the lunacy of General Harry Clair."

"I have seen them."

"Not these letters," urged the young man, fighting every inch for his love. "If you had you would not fear for an inherited taint."

"What do you mean, sir? The letters I saw said that Harry Clair died in Bedlam."

"So he did. But did the letters which you saw say how he lost his reason?"

"No, I can't call to mind that they did."

"Then there must be another packet of letters," said Hallon, promptly, "and Dorothy will shew them to you. In one of them it is stated that General Harry Clair had sunstroke in India, and so went out of his mind. You understand?"

"I confess that I don't," said Lady Panwin, drawing herself up.

"The injury which caused the madness was local," said Hallon, slowly, "therefore there is not the slightest chance of the madness being inherited by the General's descendants."

"Are you sure of this?"

"I am certain. Dorothy will shew you the letters. Willy Minter told me, and I asked Dorothy to explain. I thought it was best that she should know the worst."

"You do not understand what I mean, Mr Hallon. If Harry Clair went mad from sunstroke, would not the lunacy be inherited?"

"Certainly not. However, to set your mind at rest, I will get the opinion of an expert doctor when I go to London to-morrow. Now, what do you say?"

"It alters the case, of course," said Lady Panwin, thoughtfully; "that is, if your theory is correct."

"And you will help me to marry Dorothy?"

"I don't say that. But if Francis agrees I shall make no objection."

Hallon felt disappointed. "You know perfectly well that Mr Clair will not agree," he said, decidedly. "Also, that you can influence him more than any other person. We depend upon you."

Lady Panwin gave a short laugh. "A frail reed," she said.

"Your brother does not think so," said Hallon, significantly, "and he may need to lean upon you soon."

"He always leans on me. But what do you mean?"

"Have you forgotten our conversation?"

"Don't speak of it."

"I must know where I stand," insisted the young man. "Believe me, I wish to be your friend."

"I have always found myself able to manage without help," said Lady Panwin, stiffly.

"You may need someone should anything transpire as to what Mr Clair knows about this murder."

"He knows nothing," said the old dame, defiantly.

"Perhaps so. All the same, you feared lest he should know much. And I guessed from your glancing at that portrait that you dreaded lest he should have stabbed Sir John in a moment of insanity."

Lady Panwin sat down and gasped. "How dare you!" she exclaimed, in a furious tone. "There is not the slightest evidence to show that my brother had anything to do with the matter."

"But you thought——"

"Never mind what I thought. Where are your facts to substantiate this charge?"

"I have brought none," replied Hallon, quickly; "but another person may have less hesitation. This Count Bezkoft, for instance."

"I don't disguise from you, Mr Hallon," said Lady Panwin, trying to fight down her agitation, "that I can't understand why my brother should have brought this stranger here. He met him casually at the reading of the will, and asked him to the Manor. Why, I cannot say."

"Perhaps," said Hallon, significantly—"perhaps he could not help himself, Lady Panwin."

She was silent for a moment, then looked up with a grey drawn face. "What does this man want?" she asked in faltering tones.

"From what he said to me on the lawn, I fancy he wants money from Mr Clair to carry out some revolutionary schemes in Russia."

"But Francis has no money."

"He has two thousand a year now, and," added Percy, with a pointed look, "that income was left by Sir John Newby."

It was useless for Lady Panwin to protest that she did not understand, for she was well aware that Hallon hinted at the Russian's possible knowledge of Clair's guilt. "But it is ridiculous," she muttered.

"I quite agree with you, Mr Clair is the last man to murder a——"

"But if he were mad for the moment?" she interrupted.

"He was not mad; there is no inherited insanity. Put your mind at rest on that point."

"Will my mind ever be at rest again?" sighed Lady Panwin, and was silent for a few minutes. Hallon waited on her pleasure, and when next she spoke it was to state a clear case. "I accept you as a friend, Mr Hallon," she said, stretching out her lean hand, which he grasped, "and I will be frank. My brother wanted Sir John to lend him money, and met with a refusal unless Dorothy became Sir John's wife. Only Dorothy, myself, and my brother know the way to that vault where the wretched man's body was hidden, and Francis confessed himself that he was near the Cuckoo's Grove about the time of the murder. What with all these facts and the fact that he nearly fainted when you came with the news, I admit I fancied for a moment that Francis might have destroyed Sir John in a moment of madness."

"I don't think you need trouble further about the matter," said Hallon, quietly and soothingly. "Mr Clair is innocent. I'll stake my existence on that!" And then he explained carefully the reasons why he had dismissed his two theories of the crime. "Whoever killed Sir John Newby," ended Hallon, with emphasis, "Mr Clair is innocent."

"You have lifted a weight from my heart," said Lady Panwin, gratefully, again offering her hand; "and I am glad I spoke out. But if Francis is guiltless—and I never could believe him to be otherwise, in spite of circumstances—who is guilty?"

"Richard Newby might be. At least, Count Bez koff hinted as much."

"But Richard is in St Petersburg."

"Quite so. He was sent—according to Bezkoﬀ—by his brother on a secret errand connected with some revolutionary business in which Sir John was interested. Bezkoﬀ says that when Richard returns he can explain."

"Explain what?"

"The murder, I presume; at least, that was the inference I drew from Bezkoﬀ's loose way of talking."

"But if that is so, why has this man come down?"

"I can't say. It will be better to wait until he shews his hand. I daresay your brother will tell you why he asked him here."

"No." Lady Panwin sighed and frowned. "I have asked three or four times. Francis merely says that he likes him, and desires to have him as a guest. Perhaps," she looked up, "now that Sir John is dead he wants Dorothy to marry this Russian."

Hallon's face grew dark, and his eyes flashed: "If I thought that," he said, with clenched hands and a long-drawn breath, "I would—I would—but there, it's quite impossible. Dear Lady Panwin, ask me to dinner to-night, and I'll watch Count Bezkoﬀ. In some way or another I will learn why he has come down. As to Dorothy——"

"We can talk about her later," said Lady Panwin, rising; "and in the meanwhile believe that I am your friend."

So they made a treaty, and Hallon went back to the cottage feeling that he had scored. All the same, he was greatly puzzled by the arrival and the veiled hints of Bezkoﬀ, and wondered how he could be able to circumvent so astute a person. On the return of Willy and her brother he announced that Lady Panwin had asked him to dinner, and received much commiseration on the fact that he would not get enough to eat. In fact, Willy made him partake of a hearty afternoon tea, including eggs and toast and sandwiches. Fortified in this manner, Hallon took his way to the Manor. Only then did he remember that he had not mentioned, in his preoccupation, the facts of Count Bezkoﬀ's arrival.

Mr Clair expressed himself glad to see the young

man, which he would not have done had he guessed his audacity in aspiring to the hand of the Clair heiress. Dorothy was also very bright, as Lady Panwin had hinted of her desire to help with the marriage, always provided—as the girl whispered to Percy—that some well-established doctor gave his opinion on the question of lunacy. As to Count Bezkoﬀ, he made himself excessively charming, and was dressed in the very latest evening dress from a smart Bond Street tailor. Hallon could not be quite sure, but fancied that he was a scoundrel; yet the young Russian was so handsome and agreeable that he began to revise his opinion, and to take himself to task for having been too hasty. Only Lady Panwin was proof against the fascination of this accomplished stranger, and glared at him like Medusa. Bezkoﬀ seemed to be rather perplexed by her scarcely-veiled hostility.

The dinner was no better than it had been before, and Percy secretly congratulated himself upon having done justice to Miss Minter's tea. Throughout the meal Bezkoﬀ chatted gaily, and professed himself charmed with everything and everyone. Yet occasionally Hallon detected Mr Clair glancing at his delightful guest in a puzzled and apprehensive way. And after dinner, when the three gentlemen were seated over their wine, the host gave Hallon a broad hint that he might depart to the more congenial atmosphere of the drawing-room. The young man, with a view to lovemaking, was only too pleased. All the same, he wondered for one swift moment what Mr Clair could possibly want with the Russian.

For a wonder Lady Panwin was not asleep, but had seated herself near the window with a cup of coffee, and was listening to Dorothy playing musical scraps. Although the old woman's dread concerning inherited insanity had been nearly removed, and she was not afraid of her niece marrying, yet she did not quite approve of Hallon as a suitor. However, with a touch of sentiment, she made no objection to the young man stealing to the side of the fair musician. Busied with her own thoughts, Lady Panwin permitted the lovers to converse in whispers, which they did under cover of the music. Everything was

thus quiet and pleasant, until the sound of an angry voice broke in upon the stillness.

Into the room came Mr. Clair, hurriedly and white with anger. He could scarcely speak for rage, and gesticulated wildly. Behind him, in strange contrast, sauntered Count Bezkoﬀ, cool and debonair, with the assured air of a man who knows what he is about.

"Blackmail, Selina!" stuttered Clair, vehemently, while every one rose in justifiable alarm. "I am being blackmailed! He"—pointing to the calm Russian—"he says—declares—that I—that I——"

"Murdered Sir John Newby," finished Bezkoﬀ. "I can prove it."

•CHAPTER XI

UPON hearing her secret suspicions put into blunt and forcible words by Count Bezkoﬀ, Lady Panwin thought a swift prayer and stepped forward. Tall as was the Russian, she seemed yet taller, and looked as gaunt and grim as a leafless tree in winter. Dorothy was too horrified to speak, and Hallon judged it wise to keep silent until he knew Bezkoﬀ's grounds for the accusation. That young gentleman stood in an easy, graceful attitude, suave and cool, while Mr. Clair, restlessly excited, glared on him fiercely.

"You do not know what you are talking about, sir," said Lady Panwin to the Russian.

"Pardon me, madam, I know only too well. What I said just now I am willing to say in your English court of law, unless——"

"Yes, unless," burst out the squire, scornfully, "unless I give you half my income for your confounded Anarchistic schemes."

Bezkoﬀ bowed politely. "You save me the trouble of an explanation."

"Do you really accuse my father of murder?" asked Dorothy, with a look of indignation.

"I really do, Miss Clair."

"And on what grounds?" demanded Hallon, quietly.

"Mr Clair can inform you," said Bezkoﬀ. "He finds them sufficient, I assure you, Mr Hallon."

"No, I do not. How dare you make such a statement! I am perfectly innocent. Why should I murder my best friend, who was always willing to help me during his life, and——"

"Who has helped you after his death," said Bezkoﬀ, with a significant glance. "You have two thousand a year under the will."

"I never expected to receive it," said Clair, angrily.

"You expected to receive something," retorted the Russian, "else you would not have been present at the reading of the will."

"Then you mean to infer," struck in Lady Panwin, staring hard at the young man, "that my brother knew of the legacy and killed Sir John Newby to obtain it?"

"That is my belief," replied Bezkoﬀ, coolly.

"It is a lie, sir—a lie!" cried Mr Clair, furiously. "Sir John Newby never even hinted that he would leave me money, much less an assured income. If he had lived he would have married my daughter, and I had arranged to permit him to live in the Manor, on condition that he restored the building. Until I heard the will read I was under the impression that I was a loser by his death. That being the case, I certainly had no motive to kill him."

Bezkoﬀ shrugged his shoulders. "Of course," he remarked with chilling politeness, "you have to defend yourself."

"I speak the truth."

"Naturally. We all speak the truth when it is to our advantage to do so. However, you know what I know, Mr Clair, and unless you give me the money I require I shall inform the police."

"You villain!"

"You call me villain in your own house," said Bezkoﬀ, raising his eyebrow. "This is English politeness, I presume?"

"And your conduct is Russian honesty," said Hallon, quickly. "Blackmail has evidently been reduced to a fine art in your country."

This speech struck home, and Bezkoﬀ coloured painfully. For the first time he showed a disposition to lose his temper.

"I permit a certain licence to Mr Clair," he snarled, with an ugly look, "as he is an old gentleman, and naturally wishes to defend himself. But you are young, Mr Hallon, and with this affair you have nothing to do. Unless you address me properly I shall certainly challenge you to a duel."

The Englishman laughed. "We don't fight duels in this country," he said, contemptuously—

"especially with blackmailers. You can drop that melodramatic attitude, Count Bezkoﬀ."

"You insult me, and in the presence of ladies."

"I intend to, and if Mr. Clair only gives me the word, I shall pitch you out of yonder window."

Then Bezkoﬀ lost his temper completely. "What have you to do with this business?" he demanded, furiously.

"This much, I am engaged to marry Miss Clair."

"What!" It was the squire who spoke, and he stopped in the course of a restless walk up and down the drawing-room to speak. "You engaged to Dorothy, sir? How dare you, and without my sanction!"

"I intended to ask for your approval this night," said Hallon, bravely.

"You shall not have it!" cried Clair, angrily. "Dorothy, come away from that man's side."

"No!" said Dorothy, rather afraid and pale, but quite defiant, "I love Percy. I intend to marry Percy," and she slipped her hand into that of her lover's while Bezkoﬀ smiled cynically.

If his opponents fought amongst themselves, the task of subjugating them would be made the easier for him.

Lady Panwin saw this, and also saw the Russian's smile. Suddenly she drew her angry brother to one side, and spoke to him in a low, vehement whisper. What she said no one could hear, and while she spoke no one made any remark. In two minutes, however, Clair nodded, and seemed to be pacified by her arguments. He was the first to break the silence, and addressed himself to Hallon.

"Later we can discuss this matter," he said, making an effort to keep calm. "In the meantime, it is necessary to deal with the accusation brought against me by Count Bezkoﬀ."

Hallon guessed at once that Lady Panwin was on his side, and had been pointing out to her brother the necessity of retaining all the friends he could at such a crisis. More than this, the young man fancied that by defending Clair from this monstrous charge he might be able to gain the old gentleman's consent

to his marriage with Dorothy. However, he only guessed these things, and could not be certain.

Therefore, he judged it best to be silent, and merely bowed in answer to the squire's speech.

Clair looked at him hard. "Of course, Mr Hallon," he said, pointedly, "you do not believe what Count Bezkoﬀ says?"

"Certainly not," replied Hallon, promptly, and felt that he could declare this with all truth, "the accusation is ridiculous."

"I say so, too," cried Dorothy, squeezing her lover's hand, and pleased that he should so stoutly champion her father.

"Neither of you," remarked Bezkoﬀ, now overpoweringly polite, "have yet heard my reasons for the accusation."

"We shall hear them now," said Lady Panwin, sternly. "Francis, come and sit beside me Mr Hallon—Dorothy, be seated. Count Bezkoﬀ, as a chair is behind you, there is no need to stand. We await your explanation."

"And when you have explained," added Mr Clair, sitting down beside his sister, "you shall leave my house at once."

"As you please," remarked Bezkoﬀ, in no wise upset. "I have only a moderately large bag with me, and I can walk to the station to catch a late train to London, or I can stop in the village. But I may remark, Mr Clair, that you are foolish to treat me in this way. I wish to be your friend."

"I shall give an opinion on that point," said Lady Panwin, harshly, "when I have heard your explanation."

"And when ——" began Clair, only to be cut short by his sister.

"Francis, allow the Count to speak. Whatever he may have said to you, we are in the dark. Now, sir!" And the indomitable old woman turned a judicial eye on the handsome Russian.

Bezkoﬀ sat down resignedly, and spoke to the point. "Sir John Newby," he said, addressing every one generally, "was my friend and the friend of Russia. He was, through me, in communication with various secret societies, which have been formed

to help my unhappy country. As an emissary to such a society from Sir John, his brother Richard has been sent to Russia."

"And when does he come back?" asked Hallon, mindful of the importance of Richard's evidence with regard to the death.

"That depends upon the success of his mission."

"What is his mission?" questioned Dorothy.

"Alas! I am unable to inform you, Miss Clair."

"Unwilling, you mean," snapped Lady Panwin. "Go on, sir."

Bezkoﬀ made no direct reply, but continued his recital. "Seeing that Sir John was a millionaire, and well-disposed towards our cause, we—I speak for myself and for my revolutionary friends—we were anxious that he should come to no harm. Therefore, one of our number was set to watch him, to guard him if needs be. This watcher, or guardian—we will call him X, since he is an unknown quantity—always kept his eye on Sir John."

"To protect him from what?" asked Hallon sharply.

Bezkoﬀ shrugged his shoulders. "From any assassin, or spy, or delegate of the ruling party in Russia, who might do him harm, or who might seduce him from our side. Those in power wish for money as much as those who are oppressed, therefore Sir John would be a prize to them as well as to us. You understand?"

Hallon nodded. He understood much better than Bezkoﬀ guessed, but did not intend to commit himself to words with so clever a man.

After a moment's pause the Count continued: "X—you must remember that the letter represents our man—followed Sir John from his office in Kaffer lane to Beltan on that day—"

"Stop!" interrupted Lady Panwin. "What did Sir John do between the time he left his office to the hour he arrived at Fenchurch-street Station to come down here?"

"It would take too long to tell you," said Bezkoﬀ politely. "Moreover, it has little to do with the actual death."

"I doubt that," muttered Lady Panwin. "Go on—go on."

"X—again our man, you understand—followed Sir John to the Cuckoo's Grove, and was in the wood with him about seven o'clock."

"Did not Sir John see him?" asked Dorothy.

"No, Miss Clair. X is too clever a spy to permit himself to be seen by those he follows. X concealed himself amongst the undergrowth and watched Sir John, wondering, I may state, why Sir John waited in the wood. Apparently he was expecting someone."

"Mr Clair?" asked Percy, remembering the letter found on the dead body, or, rather, in the vault.

Bezkoﬀ guessed his thoughts. "Mr Clair can best tell you that," he remarked significantly, "and also Mr Clair may inform you if he wrote that letter published in the papers, which lured Sir John to the Cuckoo's Grove, by hinting at danger to his brother Richard."

"I did not write the letter," said Mr Clair, furiously, "nor did I go to the Grove."

"Pardon me, you were seen there by X."

"So you say," retorted Clair savagely.

"I have read the papers, Mr Clair, and I know that at the inquest you admitted that you were near the Cuckoo's Grove at seven."

"I was near the Grove, certainly, but I did not enter the Grove. Also, I lingered there until nearly seven, but left on a visit to Mrs Folks before the hour struck. Sir John would not have reached the Grove when he walked from the station until seven or after, so I must be innocent."

"A good defence," said Bezkoﬀ coolly. "But quite useless in the face of X's evidence. You did not leave the Grove until *after* seven, and you *did* enter it. Near the stile you met with Sir John, and there you stabbed him in the back, after a short and friendly conversation. Sir John was just turning to go home with you when you stabbed him."

"You told me all this at my dinner table, sir, and I say that it is a lie!" said Clair, livid with anger.

"Selina, Dorothy, Hallon, I assure you that this man never saw me kill Newby."

"I did not, certainly," said Bezkoﬀ hurriedly,

"but X did, and you stabbed Sir John to gain the two thousand a year, which he told you he intended to leave to you. After you killed Sir John, you hid the body in the underwood, and then returned late the next night to drag it to the vault. And you alone, Mr Clair, knew where that vault was to be found. This is my accusation," said Bezkoﬀ, rising and bowing. "So I ask you all if it will not be better for Mr Clair to pay me one thousand annually for the rest of his life than to be arrested for the murder, which can be proved by X?"

The squire grasped his collar and tore away his white tie. "I shall choke—I shall choke!" he muttered. "Such audacity—such daring!"

"What is your opinion, Mr Hallon?" asked Bezkoﬀ.

"I shall let you hear mine first," said Lady Panwin, rising grimly. "You are a liar, Count Bezkoﬀ, and I don't believe a single word of what you say!"

"Your defence, madam?" asked Bezkoﬀ, somewhat taken aback by this rude defiance. "What is your defence?"

"You shall hear it," said the old woman coolly, in the police court."

"In the police court!" gasped Clair, convulsively.

"You hear, madam. Your brother does not feel safe."

"My brother is safe, my brother is innocent. It is now some minutes after nine o'clock, Count Bezkoﬀ, and as you will have to catch the ten-thirty train from Beltan, and have some distance to walk, I think you had better go."

"I go"—Bezkoﬀ walked to the door, then turned melodramatically—"to tell the London police."

"By all means. But remember that if you accuse my brother to the police, he shall bring a counter-charge of blackmail against you."

"I'll risk that," said Bezkoﬀ; and would have spoken further, but that Jules entered, in response to the bell which Lady Panwin had sounded, some minutes previously.

"Jules," said his mistress, "take Count Bezkoﬀ to his room and assist him to pack his bag. Then you can direct him to the station."

"Yes, milady."

"And when the Count appears here again he is not to be admitted."

"Yes, milady," said Jules, meekly, and held open the door for the handsome Russian to depart.

"I shall say au revoir but not adieu," said Bezkoﬀ, concealing his vexation under an air of calmness, "since we shall all meet in the police court."

"With you in the dock," said Lady Panwin, sneeringly.

"And later with Mr Clair on the scaffold," retorted Bezkoﬀ, and went away smiling defiantly. All the same, he knew that he had lost his game and his chance of getting money for the cause.

When the door closed, Lady Panwin turned towards her brother and the lovers. Mr Clair, breathing hard, was leaning back against the cushion of his chair, and Dorothy was grasping the hand of Hallon. The young man approved of the decisive action of Lady Panwin, and, seeing that she was mistress of the situation, refrained from interfering. Moreover, he wished to hear what suggestions she had to make with regard to Bezkoﬀ's proposed warning of the police before giving his opinion of the present state of affairs.

"There will be a public scandal," said Clair, breathing heavily, and turning his bloodshot eyes on his sister.

"No, Francis," she replied quietly; "that man will not tell the police any of his lies."

"You believe that they are lies?"

"Of course!" Lady Panwin hesitated, then went on with more impetuosity than was consistent with her grim character. "I own, Francis, that when you fainted——"

"I did not faint," said Clair quickly.

"When you nearly fainted," corrected Lady Panwin quietly, "on the night Mr Hallon announced his discovery of the body, I fancied that a touch of General Harry Clair's insanity might have been inherited by you, and that in a moment of frenzy you might have struck the blow. But Mr Hallon defended you."

"Selina!" Clair was on his feet, much offended

by the imputation. "How could you think so badly of me. I would not kill a fly. As to General Clair's madness, there is no chance of my inheriting that. I feel quite sane."

"I understand now—I did not then—thanks to Mr Hallon."

"Will you explain exactly what you mean?"

"Later—later! Meanwhile, there is no time to be lost in meeting any possible accusation brought by Count Bezloff. Francis, Mr Hallon is your friend, and my friend——"

"And Dorothy's lover," snapped Clair. "Don't forget that, Selina."

"I do not, Francis. But your lesser cause of vexation must be swallowed up in the greater."

"I don't want Dorothy to marry Hallon. Do you hear, sir?" This last remark was to Percy.

"I hear," answered that young gentleman, respectfully. "But as Dorothy and I are devoted to one another we intend to marry."

Clair looked angrily at him, annoyed by this quiet firmness, and appealed to his daughter. "Dorothy, will you go against my wishes?"

"I love him, father," she said, piteously; and seemed to think that the statement did away with all obstacles.

"Francis"—it was Lady Panwin who spoke—"as I whispered to you some time back, we need all our friends at this juncture. Therefore, it is unnecessary for you to quarrel with Mr Hallon. After all, he is a young man, and your daughter a pretty girl. Do not exaggerate their natural affection for one another into a crime."

"I don't approve of the engagement," said Clair, obstinately. "Moreover, I certainly should have been consulted."

"Pardon me, sir, but I intended to consult you this night, I said that before," remarked Hallon, spiritedly.

"You might have been sure that I should never consent."

"Now that Sir John Newby is dead I see no reason why you should not consent, sir."

"My daughter must marry a rich man."

"No, father!" cried Dorothy, irritated that she should be thus reduced to a puppet. "I shall marry an honest man, and a man whom I love. You have money now, so I refuse to be sold."

"Child, do you dare to set your will against mine?"

"Yes, father. I have no wish to quarrel, but I am a human being and not a doll. My life's happiness is my own affair."

"I wish you to be happy, Dorothy, but——"

"Then permit me, father, to choose a husband for myself."

"Come! come!" cried Lady Panwin, sternly. "This is not the way to speak to your father. And you, Francis, have no right to coerce the girl into doing anything against her feelings. As to the marriage, that must wait until your character is cleared."

"My character is above reproach!" said Clair, indignantly.

"Now," replied his sister, with significance. "But how long will it remain so should Count Bezkoﬀ tell this story to the world?"

"You said yourself, Selina, that he would not tell the police."

"I did. And I repeat what I said. Count Bezkoﬀ is too much involved by his own confession with the Revolutionary Party in Russia to think of appearing even as a witness in an English law court. But he is quite capable of whispering to your detriment that you are the assassin of Sir John. And since you have had a legacy left to you; since you were near the Cuckoo's Grove about the time the crime was committed; and since the body was hidden in the crypt, people will begin to think that there is some truth in idle gossip."

"What is to be done, then, Selina?" asked Clair, sullenly, for he saw that his sister was taking a common-sense view of the case.

"Leave it to Mr Hallon."

"To me?" cried Percy, much astonished.

"Yes," said Lady Panwin, imperiously. "Francis, make a compact with Mr Hallon that if he clears your name he shall marry Dorothy."

"Oh!" cried the girl, joyfully, for this was a solution of her matrimonial difficulty that she had not thought of. "Promise, father!"

"Why should I? Why should I?" demanded Clair, angrily.

Lady Panwin's hand fell heavily on his frail shoulder. "To save yourself from arrest and to clear your name," she said, slowly, "it is necessary that the assassin of Sir John should be discovered. That is no easy task. If Mr Hallon will undertake the search, it is only fair that he should be rewarded."

"I make no stipulation for reward," said Percy, quickly, and unwilling to take advantage of Clair's difficulties. "Let me search for the assassin and put matters straight; then, if Mr Clair is agreeable, I can marry Dorothy. But I decline to have my marriage made contingent on my success, or non-success."

This speech was quite enough to arouse the doggedness of Clair's nature, for, like the much quoted Irishman, he was always in the opposition. "It is not for you to say either the one thing or the other, Mr Hallon," he declared, sharply. "And my sister's proposition seems to be very sensible. Of course, I am perfectly innocent. Nevertheless, I do not conceal from myself that scandal may tarnish my name. I am, therefore, willing to make a compact with you. Bring the true assassin of my unfortunate friend to the gallows, and you shall marry my daughter."

Percy hesitated; being averse to gaining a bride on such terms. But Dorothy looked at him imploringly; and Lady Panwin raised her thick eyebrows, as though to say that only by this method could he obtain his ends. He therefore accepted, and gave his hand to his prospective father-in-law. "I agree," he said, simply.

"Very good." Clair shook hands and pushed him away. "Then you can kiss my daughter as a sign that I agree to your engagement."

Hallon thought that this was an excellent idea, and sealed the compact with a warm kiss.

CHAPTER XII

IN this way the conduct of the case devolved on Hallon. After the inquest, both the London detective and Inspector Trusk made various attempts to discover the truth, but failed to find the very slightest clue to the identity of Sir John's assassin. Perhaps, as no reward had been offered, they did not strive very hard. It had been expected that Richard, on returning from Russia, would give a large sum of money to the man who hunted down the murderer of his brother. But as Richard was not mentioned in the will, and was known to be dependent upon his secretaryship for bread, there was no chance of reward from that quarter. Then the charitable societies, to which the bulk of the millionaire's fortune had been left, plainly stated that they would do nothing to avenge their benefactor. Finally, the few legacies left to Mrs Broll and other old servants were not ample enough to permit of money being promised to detectives.

There remained Mr Clair.- As he inherited two thousand a year, it seemed only just that he should try and buy the condemnation of this unknown assassin. But having made his arrangement with Hallon, the squire did not propose to squander money on Scotland Yard and let this be known. He desired to spend his windfall on himself, and on repairing the Manor. Swanson, learning this, and not being prepared to work for fame, practically abandoned the case. Of course, as a Government official, he made a few languid attempts to solve the mystery, but soon gave up all hope, seeing that the chase was likely to be a long one, and would not involve extra pay. Trusk, also, finding that his industry would not be

rewarded, refused to concern himself further with the mystery, and it appeared as though the murder of Sir John Newby would be relegated to obscurity, and figure on that long list of crimes which have never been accounted for. Thus, Hallon had a free field to work in, and could hope to arrive at the truth unhampered by interference, official or otherwise. This pleased him not a little, as he wished, unaided, to bring the assassin to justice, and so honestly win Dorothy for his wife.

Count Bezkoﬀ, escorted by Jules, the Manor butler, left the Manor within the hour, and caught the ten-thirty train to London. After a short interview with Dorothy, in which they renewed their vows, Percy returned to the Minter establishment. Here he found Willy seated in the study, busy with her story. Billy, feeling tired after a long day in the open, had retired to bed. The midnight hour begets confidence, and, moreover, Willy, being sharp, and a woman, was likely to be of great use. Percy, therefore, smoked a final pipe before going to bed, and told her of Bezkoﬀ's arrival, of his accusation, and detailed the compact which Mr Clair had made with him. Willy listened attentively to her friend, and then gave her opinion.

"The first thing you have to do is to see Mrs Broll in Sir John's London house."

"What for?" asked Percy, doubtfully. "She is not likely to know anything of the matter."

"On the contrary, she is likely to know a great deal. She must know on what terms Richard was with his brother."

"What has that to do with the murder?"

"Well," said Willy, crossing her legs and selecting a cigarette, "from what Count Bezkoﬀ says, it appears that politics are mixed up with this crime. Richard is plainly in Sir John's confidence, else he would not have been sent to Russia. Assume, for the sake of argument, that Richard and John were not on good terms, the younger brother might have utilised this revolutionary business to get Sir John pnt out of the way."

"Seeing that Richard is not mentioned in the will, that would be against his own interests."

"It looks like it. But, then, you have to find out if Richard knew of the terms of the will. Again, Mrs Broll may be aware of something connected with the Russian affairs likely to reveal if Sir John was in danger of assassination."

"You think that the murder may be a political one?"

"Perhaps. Anything is possible in Anarchistic politics."

"But," argued Hallon, "that note which lured Sir John to the Grove had to do with Richard."

"It had, and suggested, on the face of it, that Richard was a shady character. Again, Richard is involved, you see."

"But not as an active conspirator to murder his brother. That action is plainly against his interests, as I stated before."

"On the face of it, yes. But remember that we don't know about Richard's past life. There may be something in that which he did not wish Sir John to know, and, therefore, when Sir John did know—and he might have learnt it in the Cuckoo's Grove from the person who sent that note—Richard may have wanted his twin out of the way."

Hallon remonstrated. "You are building up theories out of nothing."

"Well," said Willy, staring into the fireless grate, "it looks like that, I confess. The whole thing is a mystery to me. Apparently, from what you say, Mr Clair is innocent in spite of my suspicions and Count Bezkoﬀ's accusation. If he were guilty, he certainly would not ask you to look into the case. I think you had better begin by learning all you can of Sir John's past life from Mrs Broll, and also she may be able to tell you about Richard's doings. Then there is the knife with which the crime was committed."

Hallon nodded. "A noticeable knife," he admitted; "kind of bowie. The handle, with its red and black bands, makes it a weapon not easy to forget if once seen."

"And yet," said Willy slowly, "I have seen it, and in Mr Clair's hand."

Percy jumped up. "Good heavens! Where? When?"

"I can't think, but I am sure that the handle dwells in my recollection. I have thought and thought, but I cannot remember."

"I wish you could," urged Hallon, eagerly. "That would be a great help, you know. Think, Willy, think. Did you see it at the Manor?"

"No. And yet Mr Clair held it in his hand."

"Who was present when he did so?" asked Hallon, striving to revive the links in her chain of memory.

"Sir John was present—yes, he was certainly present!" Willy stared into vacancy, as though trying to conjure up the forgotten scene before her mind's eye, which was exactly what she was attempting to do.

"And Dorothy?"

"No."

"Billy?"

"Yes. He laughed at Mrs Broll. Ah"—a flash of memory came and went—"she was in the room. I remember that much. Billy laughed at the idea of Mrs Broll fighting, and—and——" Willy stopped with her mouth open.

"Mrs Broll fighting? Why should Mrs Broll fight?"

Miss Minter rose and struck her hands together with a triumphant look in her eyes. "I know now; it all comes back to me. Billy and I went up to London with Mr Clair. Dorothy could not come because she had a headache. We called on Sir John. He was in his study with Mrs Broll, and she was describing a fight in the slums. You know, she goes to the slums."

"No, I don't. Why does she go?"

"Oh, she's mad on philanthropy."

"Mrs Broll," said Hallon, drily, "does not strike me as a woman likely to help the poor."

"You wrong her there," said Willy, who was quite pleased at the sudden revival of her memory. "She is really very kind to the poor, and Sir John encouraged her kindness. There is a slum in Whitechapel—a pet slum of Mrs Broll's. On this day—in the morning—she was there, and a man was fighting with his wife. He was a Swedish sailor, and not so

strong as his wife, a great brawny woman. "As the sailor was getting the worst of the fight he drew the knife, and Mrs Broll snatched it away from him. She brought it home in triumph, and was telling Sir John of her adventure when I entered with Billy and Mr Clair. We heard the story, and Mr Clair took up the knife and looked at it. I remember quite well, because Billy called Mrs Broll by the name of Penthesilea, which annoyed her."

"Are you sure that it was the same knife?"

"Absolutely! The handle struck me as so strange—red and black bands alternately. Of course, there may be another knife of that description; but it does not seem likely."

"What because of the knife?"

"I can't tell you. Mr Clair laid it down on the desk, and then Mrs Broll, offended with Billy, left the room. I never set eyes on the knife again until I found it in the wood, and then its appearance only stirred up a vague recollection of seeing Mr Clair holding it. You have aided me to remember the whole scene."

"If what you say is correct—"

"It is. I swear it is!" said Willy, quickly.

"Then, the knife having been in Sir John's possession, he might have brought it down to Beltan himself, for protection."

Willy shook her head. "I can't see that, Percy," she remarked. "Why should Sir John have carried such a weapon?"

"He may have known whom he was to meet, and so have been afraid."

"You forget," said Willy, wisely, "the letter was anonymous."

"Sir John might have known the writing."

"Perhaps. And yet it does not seem possible"—Miss Minter hesitated—"it is not probable that Mr Clair took it," she ended, nervously.

"No," rejoined Hallon, positively. "Whosoever is guilty, Mr Clair must be innocent. The very fact that Bezkoﬀ accuses him makes me believe that he did not murder Sir John. Bezkoﬀ," repeated Percy, frowning, "was, according to his own shewing, a friend of Sir John's. What if he stole the

knife, having access to the study, and was himself the X he speaks of. Then all would be accounted for."

"Save the fact that Count Bezkoﬀ accuses Mr Clair," said Willy. "He would not risk doing that if he were guilty."

"He would for money, which means much to his party. These Russian people stick at nothing. Then, again, Richard might have taken the knife."

Willy shook her head again. "Richard is in Russia. He could not have committed the crime."

"He may have given the knife to someone."

"We are arguing in a circle," said Miss Minter, with a weary air, and glancing at the clock. "I say again, what I said before, that it will be best for you to go to London and see Mrs Broll. Now that you know about the knife, it is more important than ever that you should see her, and learn if she missed it from the study."

Percy stretched himself. "All right," he said, "I'll go up to-morrow."

"Do you know Sir John by sight?" asked Willy after a pause.

"Did I know him, you mean, since he is dead, poor wretch," said Hallon. "Well, yes. I saw him twice or thrice here. A heavy, red-faced man, clean-shaven, who always wore grey clothes and a white waistcoat. Why do you ask?"

"Because his brother Richard is exactly the same in looks. If Richard has come back you will be able to recognise him from this description. Red-faced, burly, and prosperous-looking. Only Richard usually wears black clothes and never a white waistcoat. I suppose Sir John thought that there was a chance of a mistake being made about them, and so made Richard dress differently. Well——"

"I'll go to town to-morrow," said Percy, yawning. "When I return I'll tell you everything Mrs Broll tells me."

This being settled, Hallon retired to bed, and fell asleep immediately. The case at present was so confusing that he did not wish to muddle his brain further over so inexplicable a problem. When he heard what Mrs Broll had to say about the knife, he

would then, perhaps, be able to advance. At present there was no clue.

Next day Percy went up to London by the ten-fifty-five and reached Fenchurch-street shortly after twelve o'clock. He then took the underground to South Kensington, and sought the house of the millionaire. It was a handsome residence on Camden Hill, situated in a large garden, shut out from the roadway by high walls of red brick. A ring at the door brought a footman, and Percy learnt that Mrs Broll was within. He sent his card to her by the man, and shortly was conducted to the drawing-room. This somewhat surprised Hallon, as he fancied that Mrs Broll would have received him in her own apartment. But he presumed that until the executors settled her late master's affairs, she considered she had a right to the entire mansion.

In a few minutes Mrs Broll came mincing into the splendid room, dressed gaudily as usual. She had even discarded the crape-fringed shawl which had marked her sorrow for Sir John, and was arrayed in a yellow gown trimmed with green, and fitting tight to her spare figure. Her cap—she wore an early Victorian cap—was of white lace, intertwisted with blue ribbons, and adorned with paste stars. Round her thin neck dangled two gold chains with large lockets attached, and lengthy earrings depended from her ears. Finally, she had five or six bracelets on her skinny wrists, and wore red mittens. In this gorgeous and wholly unsuitable garb she looked like an old parrot, and when she greeted her visitors screeched "like one, with the usual upthrow of the hands.

"Oh, Mr Hallon, how are you, sir?" she cried, with her black eyes twinkling and shewing most of her teeth. "I am glad to see you, sir, though I should be glad to know why you have come here. But, then, I do know. Oh, yes, I know, sir. There's no deceiving me. But how news travels so quickly I can't tell."

"What news?" asked Hallon, stiffly.

"Joyful news, the very best news. And yet"—her thin mouth took on a sorrowful twist—"sad news to me, who nursed them both."

Hallon wondered if she had been drinking, as, in spite of her gay dress, her eyes were red, and she apparently was trying to be cheerful under difficulties.

"Are you alluding to Sir John?" he asked, puzzled.

"And to Richard, who was my favourite. But he is gone."

"Richard? You mean Sir John!"

Mrs Broll heard a sound at the door, and spun round like a teetotum to face it. "Judge for yourself, sir. Here he is!"

The door opened, and Percy started to his feet with an exclamation. And well he might, for on the threshold he beheld—Sir John Newby!

CHAPTER XIII

FOR the first and last time in his life Percy experienced that uncanny feeling described in the Book of Job: "Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up." So unexpected was the sight of Sir John Newby that the young man verily believed for the moment that the dead had returned. Mrs Broll burst out laughing at his consternation, like the old witch she was, and clapped her skinny hands together.

"Back from the grave! Back from the grave!" shrieked Mrs Broll.

Sir John might well have returned therefrom, for in place of being the stout, red-faced, prosperous speculator whom Hallon knew, he was pale and wrinkled, bent, and somewhat lean. His clothes—still the grey suit and white waistcoat which he invariably wore—hung on his shrunken frame in loose bags, and even while he looked on his visitor's scared face a nervous tremor seized him, which he found hard to repress. In fact, the whole appearance of the millionaire was that of a man who had sustained a severe shock.

"You are surprised, Mr Hallon," he remarked, with a ghost of a smile, and the ghost of his former strong voice.

"I can't believe that it is you, Sir John," stammered Percy.

"We were not very well acquainted," said Newby, drily, and walked slowly to a near armchair, into which he sank with a sigh of relief. "'You can go, Martha,'" said he to Mrs. Broll.

The former nurse and present housekeeper hastily arranged some soft cushions to make her master's seat easier.

"Let me get you a sip of port wine," she croaked coaxingly. "I don't want you to die on my hands, now that you are back, well and strong."

"There is no chance of my dying now," returned Newby significantly. "The thunderbolt does not fall twice in the same place."

This enigmatic utterance seemed to puzzle Mrs Broll. "You never told me that you were struck by lightning, sir," she exclaimed.

A faint smile illuminated the tired face of the millionaire, but he did not explain his parable.

"You can go, Martha," he said again.

"Oh!" screeched Mrs Broll, with an indignant glance at Hallon. "If your fond and faithful nurse is to be shut out from your confidence for a mere stranger—"

"There, there! I have told you everything, Martha, and—"

"Of course you have," interrupted the old woman, who would not be put down. "When I saw you late last night enter this house, looking more like a corpse than a living man, and when I heard the dreadful news of—"

This time Newby interrupted, and very sharply.

"Be silent! You presume too much. Go, when I tell you!"

Mrs Broll tossed her gaily-decorated head, and shewed her many teeth in an unpleasant manner. But a glance at Sir John's white, haggard face shewed that she had reached the limit of his endurance. She therefore withdrew, muttering, and shot a Parthian arrow as she opened the door.

"Richard would never have treated his Martha in so brutal a way," she snapped, and disappeared.

"These women—these women!" groaned Newby, with a faint smile. "I have turned my old nurse into a tyrant, by too great an affection."

Hallon did not answer. He still stared at the man who had returned from the grave, and still wondered—rather foolishly—if the millionaire was flesh and blood, or merely a ghost. Sir John saw the wonder expressed on the young man's face, and smiled again.

"You did not expect to find me here, Mr Hallon?"

he remarked, and pointed to a seat rear at hand.

Percy sat down very thankfully. "No. Your body——"

"Not my body, Mr Hallon."

"Then that of your double."

"Quite so. And, remember, that I have a double," said Newby, slowly.

Hallon started, as the meaning of this speech dawned on him. "Your twin-brother Richard!" he gasped.

"Yes. He is the one who has been murdered."

"How stupid of me——" began Hallon, wondering why he had not recollected the likeness between the twins at this particular moment.

Sir John mistook his meaning. "No," he interrupted, quickly, "you were not stupid to think that the murdered man was myself, seeing that Richard exactly resembled me in looks, and wore similar clothes to mine. My grey suit and white waistcoat and slouch hat are so well known in the City, and, I may say, out of it, that the mistake was perfectly excusable. But here I am in my own proper body, and there are my clothes, so you may be certain that I am—I, which is rather a Shakespearean way of putting it."

"I did not exactly mean that," protested Percy. "But only for the moment, seeing that you are alive, I wondered who had been killed in your place."

"Are you sure that Richard was killed in my place?" asked Newby, significantly.

"I await to hear your explanation of that, Sir John."

"Why should I give it to you, Mr Hallon?" retorted the millionaire, with a piercing look.

"Oh, there is no positive reason why you should. And yet, I came up here, on behalf of Mr Clair, to learn, if possible, who had murdered you, and why?"

"Does Mr Clair take so much interest in me as all that?"

Hallon shrugged his square shoulders. "Naturally. Mr Clair is one of your best friends and inherits two thousand a year."

"Ah! " There was a world of meaning in

Newby's tone. "I fear that Mr Clair will have to give up that income, seeing that I am alive. I returned here last night, and have already communicated with my lawyer, with Scotland Yard, and with the Press. By this evening it will be known that I am alive, and that my twin-brother is the murdered man."

"Well," said Percy, half to himself, "I might have guessed the truth from the fact of the silver watch."

"What's that?" asked Newby quickly.

"On the corpse was found a silver watch," explained Hallon, "and as Mr Clair said that you possessed a gold one——"

"Like this?" Newby whipped a massive gold watch out of his waistcoat pocket and shewed it to Percy.

"Exactly. Well, then, from the fact of the watch of the dead man being silver I might have guessed that the body was not yours."

"In spite," said Sir John, leaning his chin on his hand and looking keenly at his visitor—"in spite of the fact that Richard was masquerading in my clothes, and had letters addressed to me in his pockets?"

"You seem to know all about the matter, Sir John?"

"Of course. I read all the papers."

"Why did you not come forward and reveal yourself?"

"I could not, because—— But why?"—Sir John broke off and arose—"why should I confide in you, Mr Hallon?"

Percy rose in his turn. "There is absolutely no reason why you should, Sir John," he said, politely. "I came here with the intention of helping Mr. Clair. But now that I find you are alive I will take my leave, and return to inform those at the Manor that your brother Richard was the victim."

"One moment," said the millionaire as the young man walked towards the door; "tell me how Miss Clair took the news of my supposed death?"

"She was sorry, of course," said Percy, shortly, and flushing.

"H'm! She would have been sorry for a dog's death. And yet I had hoped to make her love me." Hallon was about to say that Dorothy loved him, but refrained. Until he knew more it would be better to hold his tongue. The fact of Newby being alive altered circumstances. And now that Mr Clair was deprived of his income he might be again anxious to secure it in another way—that is, by Dorothy's marriage to Newby.

"I bid you good-day, Sir John," he said, opening the door, "and I congratulate you on your escape."

"From what?" asked Newby, coldly.

"From death."

"Ah! you forget that my brother was murdered."

"Oh, no. But he was killed in mistake for you."

"How can you be sure of that?" said Sir John, quickly.

Percy looked surprised. "Seeing that your brother was so like you in looks, and wore similar clothes, I presume that the assassin stabbed him in mistake for you."

"It might be so," muttered Newby, turning to the window and thrusting his large hands into his pockets.

Hallon made no reply. It struck him as strange that Sir John should appear to be so ignorant, since he assuredly had been near the place where the tragedy was committed, and at the very hour of the murder. And why Richard Newby, who had been supposed to be in Russia, should have preceded John to the Cuckoos Grove was a question which only the elder twin could answer, especially when Richard Newby had been masquerading in his brother's clothes. However, as the millionaire did not seem inclined to be communicative, Hallon judged it best to return to Belton and inform Dorothy of this revival of the difficulty which had hitherto prevented their marriage. Without further words he was about to withdraw, when Newby stopped him.

"Come back and sit down, Mr Hallon," he said, without turning. "From what I read in the newspapers you were the person who found the body in the crypt."

"I and Miss Clair found the body."

"What were you and Miss Clair doing in the crypt?" asked Sir John, with a frown.

Hallon stiffened. "As you will not be frank with me, Sir John, you will pardon my saying that I see no reason why I should be frank with you. Miss Clair herself will explain."

"I can't go down to see Miss Clair until to-morrow," said Newby, biting his fingers, irritably. "The report of my supposed death has made such a stir that I have much to do to put things right again. Also, I have to learn who killed Richard."

"Don't you know?" asked Hallon, involuntarily.

"No," Newby wheeled round. "Do you?"

"Of course not," rejoined the young man, warmly. "I came here hoping, for the sake of Mr Clair, to trace the assassin, who murdered—I thought, as we all thought—you. Now that I find you are alive, of course everything is altered."

"Quite so. By the way, you talk of helping Mr Clair. In what way?"

"Mr Clair is accused of having murdered you."

Newby raised his thick white eyebrows. "Indeed! And by whom?"

"A Russian called Count Bezloff, who——"

Newby grew violently red. "Do you mean to say that he dares to—to—— Oh"—he clenched his hands—"what a villain! And do you believe this accusation, Mr Hallon?"

"Certainly not," rejoined Percy, promptly. "And yet Count Bezloff declares that a spy saw Mr Clair strike the blow."

"Augh!" Newby wiped the perspiration from his wrinkled brow, and took a turn up and down the room. Finally he stopped abruptly before the young man, who was still standing near the half-open door, with the handle in his hand. "Close it," said Newby, sharply, "and sit down. I shall tell you what has happened. You may as well know, since it will appear in the evening papers."

CHAPTER XIV

CURIOUS to learn what he could, Percy resumed his seat, but left it to Sir John to begin the conversation.

"I see you know a great deal of the inward workings of this case?" said Newby.

"Oh, no!" Hallon disclaimed the responsibility promptly. "I happened to be on the spot when the body of your brother was discovered, and also I heard Count Bezkoﬀ's accusation. But I know nothing else. I should think that you, Sir John, would be the most likely person to solve the mystery of your brother's death, since you were in the Cuckoo's Grove shortly after seven, when the crime—according to the medical evidence—was committed."

Newby threw up his hands. "I'll tell you what I told the reporters of the papers," he said, harshly, "and you can judge for yourself. You remember that letter found on my brother's body?"

"Yes. It was addressed to you, and hinted at some disgrace connected with your brother."

"Exactly. Now this, Mr Hallon, I did not tell the reporters. My brother was a scamp, and had forged my name to several bills. I warned him that I knew, and sent him to Russia on private business."

"Connected with Count Bezkoﬀ, and his revolutionary schemes?"

"I decline to tell you that," retorted Newby, with emphasis. "I said that I sent him on private business."

"I beg your pardon, Sir John. Continue, please."

"Instead of going to Russia—and this, Mr Hallon, is what I told the reporters—Richard went to Beltan in response to that letter."

"How did he get it, seeing that it was addressed to you?"

"Richard was my secretary and opened my letters. Finding that one he, naturally, did not shew it to me, since it hinted at further rascalities on his part, but went down to meet the person who wrote it. I can't say who the person was."

"But why in your clothes?"

"I can't explain that, either, Mr Hallon. But my nurse, Mrs Broll, or, rather, I should say my house-keeper saw the anonymous letter, and thinking Richard might come to harm—she dotes on him, I may tell you, or rather, did, since he is dead—she urged me to go also to the Cuckoo's Grove. I, therefore, left my portmanteau at the Beltan Station, intending to return for it, and walked to the Cuckoo's Grove. By the stile I found the body of my brother, dressed in my clothes, which he had taken from this house. He was dead, having been stabbed in the back. I was horrified, as you may imagine, and was about to run back to the village and give the alarm, when a sack was thrown over my head and I was bound hand and foot."

"Who by?"

"That I can't tell you—the sack was over my head. A hand was thrust under it and a gag was placed in my mouth. Then I was dragged into the underwood, and remained there for hours. Later—when it was dark, as I surmised, for I could see nothing by reason of the sack—food and drink were given me, and the gag was removed. I did not eat, but being desperately thirsty I drank the wine which was thrust into my hands. It was apparently drugged, for I remember no more until I found myself in a small bare room in Soho."

"How did you know it was in Soho?" asked Hallon, quickly.

"I found that out afterwards, when I got away. I never saw those who had kidnapped me. Food and drink, and the papers containing an account of the case, were thrust into my room, but those who placed them there never appeared. You may imagine my feelings, Mr Hallon, at reading my own obituary, and knowing that I was numbered with the dead. I tried to escape, but could not, for the window was barred and the door was locked. Late last night,

however, I found the door had been left open. I went out and found the house deserted. I then walked home, and Mrs Broll looked after me. This morning I sent for the police and others, and told them what I told you. It is my intention to try and find the house in Solio, and then I may learn why I was kidnapped, and why my brother was murdered. Also, I may find out why I was allowed to escape, for undoubtedly the door was intentionally left open. The whole thing is a mystery to me."

"In one respect it is to me," said Hallon, wondering at this queer history. "I believe that you were kidnapped by revolutionary people, seeing that Bezkoff confessed that a spy followed you. But when you were in their power, I can't understand why they should have let you go without getting money out of you."

"I see your point." I can only suppose that, as Richard was mistaken for me, I was mistaken for Richard; and that those who kidnapped me, whosoever they were, finding that I was the wrong man, let me go when they realised their mistake. But as I tell you, Mr Hallon, I saw no one, I was asked no questions, my money was left untouched, and I was treated fairly well, considering."

"But the drugging?"

"That was necessary, seeing that I had to be removed from Beltan to London. Had I my senses I should not have gone quietly. However, I have told you my story. What do you think?"

"It is strange, and I believe it has to do with Russia. Probably you were required to supply money. Indeed, Bezkoff says so."

"Then why—if my kidnappers were Russian—why did they not ask me for money? Why keep out of my way? Why let me go without attaining any possible end?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders again. "I can't say. I am quite bewildered," he remarked.

"Well," said Sir John, setting his jaw firmly, "I intend to use all the money I can to learn who kidnapped me, and who murdered my unfortunate brother. I'll never marry until I learn the truth."

Hallon rose. "And perhaps you may not marry then," he said, coldly.

"Oh, yes. Miss Clair is to be my wife."

"I think not. She is engaged to me."

"To you?" Sir John flushed a deep red, then laughed harshly. "I think not, Mr Hallon. When I was dead you might have had a chance, but now that I am alive and Mr Clair loses his income, he will be on my side, believe me. If he does not support me——" He hesitated.

"What then?" asked Hallon, calmly, although his heart beat rapidly.

"Then I'll ruin her father."

"You shall not!"

"I shall. I have a mortgage on the Manor. I'll foreclose, and turn Clair out of doors."

"You shall not!" said Hallon, determinedly. "If you harm Mr Clair, or trouble his daughter, I shall bring home the crime to you."

"Go!" said Newby, violently; and without another word Hallon went.

He returned to Beltan, somewhat surprised at the rather calm way in which Sir John had taken his threat. Instead of turning pale, or arguing the matter, or even denying the accusation, he had simply ordered him to go. Percy had made the accusation more in desperation than for any possible reason, since he could conceive no motive why Newby should murder his brother. But now that the millionaire was so apparently prepared to be charged with the crime—for if he had not he certainly would have been aghast and angered—Hallon began to wonder if his chance shot had hit the mark.

It was assuredly strange that both brothers should have gone to Beltan, and to exactly the same place, and dressed in similar clothes. Of course, the hint given by Mrs Broll to Sir John explained his presence in the Grove; but why should Richard have gone there in masquerade costume? And that disguise had evidently been carefully prepared. The dress, the hat, the letters, all belonged to Newby, and only the silver watch had hinted at the real identity of the dead man. Certainly no one, not even Trusk or

Swanson, had found that watch a clue to the true name of the dead, although both had entertained suspicions. But now that Sir John was alive the interest in the case would be revived, and the truth might be arrived at. Swanson would doubtless be employed by the millionaire to learn who had killed Richard. At least, Sir John had hinted at his determination to enlist the services of the police and to give a reward. Were he guilty, he certainly would not act in that way; and here, as Hallon thought, was a new element of perplexity.

However, there was nothing to be done save to tell Clair that Newby was alive, and that his inherited income was lost. Hallon felt, like Othello, that his occupation was gone. To gain the hand of Dorothy, he had undertaken to find Newby's murderer. Now he had discovered, at the outset, that Newby was alive, and still anxious to marry Dorothy. And from what Hallon knew of Mr Clair's weak character, he foresaw that the chance of making the girl his wife was remote. Lady Panwin might still continue to be his friend. But she was as anxious as her brother to rebuild the ruined fortunes of the Clair family, so possibly Lady Panwin would go over to the enemy. "I am returning with my tail between my legs," said Percy, bitterly, to himself, as he alighted at the Beltan Station. "Now that Mr Clair's reputation is safe, and a millionaire's son-in-law is in the field, I may whistle for my bride."

To his delight, he found that Dorothy was spending the day with Willy Minter. Billy had gone for a run in his beloved motor-car, and the two girls were seated on the tiny lawn drinking afternoon tea and talking of their future. Willy saw nothing ahead of her, but everlasting communion with Billy; but Dorothy, as a prospective bride, had a more interesting time to come. When Hallon appeared at the gate with his bag, looking mournful and somewhat dusty—for he had walked from the station—Dorothy rose with a cry, and flew to him.

"My darling, how glad I am to see you!" she said, taking the bag and kissing him. "How tired you look, poor thing! Quick, Willy, send for some more tea. Percy, sit down here." She pressed him

into a comfortable basket chair. "How surprised I am—and how delighted!"

"But why did you come back?" asked Willy, who stood with the tea-pot in one hand, an empty plate in the other, and with an amazed face. "We thought you would be in London for days, hunting out the truth."

"The unexpected has happened," said Percy, mournfully.

"It usually does," said Willy, signalling to her small maid-servant, who had come out to see if the ladies wanted anything. "And the unexpected in this case is not very pleasant, judging from your downcast looks. Well?"

Hallon looked after the retreating form of the maid, who had gone to brew fresh tea and cut more bread and butter. Waiting until she was out of ear-shot, he hurled his bomb. "Sir John Newby is alive!"

Dorothy shrieked, and fell back into a chair; Willy gasped, but kept her balance. It was Willy, the strong-minded, who first spoke. "You must be crazy, Percy!"

"I have had sufficient to make me crazy, my dear girl. To see a man alive when you saw him dead is not pleasant."

"What nonsense! If Sir John was dead, how can he be alive?"

"I never said that he was dead."

"But, Percy," cried Dorothy, sitting bolt upright and leaning forward, with her hands grasping the arms of her chair, "I saw him dead!"

"You saw his brother Richard," said Percy, grimly.

"Impossible! Richard, according to Mrs Broll, and that Count Bezkoﬀ you told me about, went to Russia," said Miss Minter, weakly.

"He should have gone there, but he preferred to come to Beltan."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you, no more than I can say why Richard masqueraded as Sir John, or why he was killed."

The girls looked at one another and gasped again.

As yet they could not realise the surprising news. Dorothy waited until the maid had come and gone again, and then spoke, while Willy poured out a fresh cup of tea for each. They felt that they wanted a stimulant. "If Sir John is alive," said Dorothy, in a small, frightened voice, "father loses his income."

"Yes," assented Percy, with a groan. "But he can get it again when you become Lady Newby."

"I would rather die!" cried the girl, jumping up.

"Don't be silly, Dorothy!" said Willy, in rather a cross voice. "See! you have spilt your tea. Sir John won't bother you any more."

"Yes he will," said Hallon, gloomily. "He expressed his intention of again proposing to Dorothy."

"I won't let him!" said the girl, determinedly, and sat down again.

"I tell you Sir John won't bother you again," said Willy once more. "Can't you see, Percy? If Richard is dead, his brother must have killed him. Remember the red-banded knife in the library. No one but Sir John could have taken it from his desk."

CHAPTER XV

"Stop! Stop! You go too fast! Why should Sir John kill his brother?"

"I can't say until I hear your story," said Willy, tartly.

Hallon finished his tea, held out his cup for more, and without pause, related all that had taken place. Dorothy, hugging her knees, listened in silence; neither did Miss Minter make any remark until the narrative was ended. Then she nodded her head judicially. "I told you so. Sir John killed his brother. He could have got the knife which was lying on his desk. He admits that he came to the Grove, and saw his brother dead before him."

"He found him there," said Percy, perplexed.

"I know that. He found him alive and then stabbed him. As to that kidnapping business, I believe it is all rubbish."

"But why should Sir John hide?" exclaimed Dorothy, quickly.

"He fancied that he might be accused. But when he found that the body was mistaken for his corpse he came out to face things."

"He might have come out in the first instance," retorted Percy. "I do not see that he is any better off."

"Oh, yes," said Willy, obstinately. "He has had time to mature his plans. He'll lay the blame on some one else, you may be sure."

"But his motive?"

"Oh, well"—Willy was somewhat disconcerted—"I can't explain that, you know. But Richard, according to Sir John, forged bills. Sir John may have killed him to prevent further disgrace to the family."

"And so have risked worse disgrace," said Percy, jeeringly. "You are talking nonsense, Willy!"

"Well, I may be—but those are my opinions. If Sir John were innocent, he would have knocked you down for daring to accuse him."

"I am not so easily knocked down," said Hallon, nettled. "However, you know all. What is to be done?"

"I must go and tell my father," cried Dorothy, now on her feet.

"And I," said Willy, forcibly, "will wait until I hear Sir John's defence, and then see if I can't bring home the crime to him."

"My own words," cried Hallon, who had risen to accompany Dorothy. "And I did think his behaviour was strange when I spoke to him."

"He is guilty!" declared Willy, firmly. "What do you think, Dorothy?"

"I don't know what to think," said the girl, irritably. "All I know is, that there seems to be small chance of my marrying Percy."

"You will give me up?" cried Hallon, wounded.

"Never! How can you think so meanly of me? I'll tell you now, and again in the presence of my father, that I'll refuse Sir John and remain faithful to you, dear."

Willy made no attempt to prevent their going away. She wanted to be alone to think over things. This young woman's life was somewhat dull, as she grew weary of most things, and had a very active brain. Therefore, she welcomed this criminal problem as affording food for reflection and an interesting occupation. Also, she wished Dorothy to marry Hallon, and saw that, now Sir John was alive, Mr Clair would retreat to his original position. Willy, therefore, remained where she was and grappled with the mystery like a female Vidocq, while the lovers, hand in hand, like Adam and Eve leaving Paradise, went to the Manor House. And, like Adam and Eve, they felt that they *were* leaving Paradise, since selfish Mr Clair would be the angel with the flaming sword who would forbid their return.

It would be difficult to describe the precise feelings which filled the squire's breast when he heard the

strange news. "He was at once angry and glad—angry at losing his income, and glad that his wealthy friend had come to life, since he was able to turn Dorothy into a millionairess. In vain did Dorothy point out that Mr Clair had given his consent to her marriage with Hallon. Her father maintained—and this was perfectly true—that he had agreed only on condition that Percy should learn who had killed Sir John. As the millionaire was alive, the bargain fell through.

"But if Percy discovers who killed Richard?" asked Dorothy, in despair.

"That has nothing to do with me," said Mr Clair, selfishly. "No one can possibly accuse me of murdering Richard. Not a word more, Dorothy. You shall marry Sir John."

"I refuse to give her up!" cried Percy, angrily.

"She is an obedient daughter," retorted Mr Clair. "And—"

"Not in this case," cried Dorothy, indignantly. "I'll marry Percy or die an old maid!"

"Oh, no, you won't!"

"Oh, yes, I will!"

And there father and daughter joined issue. Mr Clair remarked that he was a Lear, and ordered Percy to leave the Manor. Of course, the young man had to depart, since an Englishman's house is his castle; but he did so with a defiant speech. Dorothy was sent to her bedroom; and then Mr Clair faced the wrath of his sister, who was quite on the side of the lovers.

"Don't you interfere, Selina," said Mr Clair, wrathfully.

"I shall interfere, if I see fit," she retorted. "You are behaving very badly, Francis. Love is love."

"Love in this case is poverty for all of us," snapped Clair.

"Then find the church plate hidden by Abbot Hurley, and you won't be poor. That would be better than hanging on to Sir John. I wonder you have not more pride, Francis."

Mr Clair demonstrated that it was pride, and of the best sort, which made him thus act the stern father. Lady Panwin did not agree with him in any

way; but as her brother, like all weak people, could be disagreeably obstinate, she abandoned the argument, and went to console Dorothy in her bedroom. "Wait," was Lady Panwin's advice. "Sir John is alive, but you are not yet his wife."

"I never shall be!" cried Dorothy, rebelliously.

"Time will shew," remarked Lady Panwin, with that wisdom of age which youth finds so objectionable when expressed in proverbs. "But in any case, Dorothy, I am on your side. I am no supporter of a weather-cock policy, either in political affairs or in domestic matters."

And so things stood when Sir John Newby arrived late the next day. To be precise, he came down in time for dinner, exactly as he ought to have done on that fatal evening when Richard was murdered. Mr Clair received him with joy, tempered with regret at the loss of his two thousand a year, and Lady Panwin behaved frigidly. As to Dorothy, she preferred to remain in her own room, and refused to meet this annoying lover who had reappeared so inopportunistically. But Newby made allowance for her absence.

"I quite understand," he said, when he and Mr Clair sat over their wine. "I saw that this Hallon was after her when I came down before. A maiden fancy, my dear sir—nothing more. Dorothy has more sense than to throw me over for such a pauper."

"He is not precisely a pauper, Newby."

"At all events, he is not sufficiently rich to help you, as I intend to do when I am your son-in-law. You shall have your two thousand a year again, Clair. I promise you that."

"I shall be glad of it," said Mr Clair, sipping his wine.

"Does that mean you regret I am alive?"

"Oh, no! I am much obliged for your kindness in remembering me in your will," said the squire, hastily. "But I would rather see you alive than possess all your wealth."

Sir John grunted disbelievingly. "Well, then, we'll leave Dorothy to come out of her sulks. She can't remain shut up for ever. My money and your authority will bring her to the altar in due course."

"In the meantime, I wish to learn who killed my brother."

"You have no idea?"

"This Hallon accused me," said Newby, gruffly. "What do you think of that, Clair?"

"Bless me! What insolence! And on what grounds?"

"I never gave him a chance of stating them," said the millionaire, in his grim way. "I turned him out of my house at once. But I quite guess the grounds. That knife was on my desk, you know. Martha brought it from the slums, where she obtained it in a fight."

"I remember. But why should possession of that knife incriminate you?"

"Oh, it's circumstantial evidence. The knife was in my possession, on my desk—constantly before my eyes, in fact. It is therefore natural for Hallon to think that I used it to stab Richard. That I had no possible motive to kill my brother does not matter."

"Richard was a scamp," said the squire, meditatively.

"What of that?" demanded the self-made man, fiercely. "Do you think that I murdered him on that ground?"

"No, no! Don't take me up so short, Newby," remarked Mr Clair, in his most soothing manner. "What I mean is that, as Richard was always a scamp, it is probable that he may have been killed by one of those disreputable people he associated with."

"It is not impossible," said Sir John, finishing his wine, and pushing back his glass. "You know, Clair, that I told you how I learnt Richard had forged my name? I sent him to Russia to get him out of the way, for the time being, while I made inquiries. When I left my office to come down here on the day of the murder, I deposited my portmanteau at the Fenchurch Street station, and then went into a low quarter of the city in search of a man to whom one of the cheques was made payable. I found the public-house which the man haunted, for I forced Richard to tell me that much. But I expect Richard warned

his friend, for the man was gone. After a vain hunt, I returned to the station and came down here. You know what happened next."

"But why did Richard come down here instead of going to Russia?"

"I explained that. The anonymous letter frightened him, and he came personally to see the writer in the Grove. I expect he dressed up as me, hoping that the writer would think he was Sir John Newby the rich man, and not Richard Newby the criminal. But of this I cannot be sure. However, the police may learn much."

"How will the police begin?" asked Mr Clair, helplessly. "It seems hopeless to trace a true path through this labyrinth of crime."

"The police will search for the house in which I was confined in Soho. They can begin at that point."

"Have they found the house?"

"Not yet. In my hurried exit from it I lost trace of its whereabouts, so I can't help them. But there is another clue, which I did not tell to Hallon or to the reporters, but which I tell to you. When the sack was dropped over my head in the Cuckoo's Grove I naturally, as any man would, struck out with my hands. I grabbed at my assailant, although I did not, and could not, see him. My hands landed somewhere about his throat, and I brought away this, which I retained." And Newby handed to his friend a daintily-wrought breast-pin in the shape of a golden double-eagle, with ruby eyes. "Have you ever seen any one wearing that, Clair?" asked the millionaire, while the squire examined the pin.

"No," answered the other. "Double-eagle? That's German."

"And also Russian," said Newby, slowly.

"Oh!" Mr Clair rose. "Do you refer to Count Bezko?"

"Exactly." Sir John rose also, large and impressive. "I have seen him wear this breast-pin. Puff!"—he fanned himself with his handkerchief—"how hot this room is. Let us go outside."

They moved towards the centre French window, and stepped out on to the lawn. It was still fairly light,

and the evening was very still. At the foot of the terrace steps the two men paused. Mr Clair, leaning against a yew-tree trunk, looked at the pin again.

"Then you think that Count Bezkoﬀ kidnapped you?"

"Yes. The pin belongs to him, I am certain."

A hand came from behind the trunk of the tree, and, stretching over Clair's shoulder, grasped the breast-pin.

"My property, by Sir John's own acknowledgment," said a laughing voice; and the speaker stepped out to face the two astonished men. It was Count Bezkoﬀ.

CHAPTER XVI

BEZKOFF was not in evening dress, and Newby guessed from this that he could not be stopping at any house in the neighbourhood. In a blue serge suit, with a tweed cap, well booted and neatly gloved, he looked more English than ever in the waning light. With a suave smile on his handsome face, he swung a slim Malacca cane, and appeared amused by the surprise of the elder men. Mr. Clair was the first to recover his speech.

"I ordered you out of my house," said the squire, haughtily.

"But not out of the grounds," said Bezkoﬀ, gracefully.

"It is the same thing. You are trespassing."

"I understand. Pardon my ignorance of English law. Now that I have recovered my property, I shall depart."

"Stop!" shouted Newby, who was purple in the face with anger. "I want a word or two with you, Count."

"A dozen if you like," said Bezkoﬀ, returning.

"I am waiting, sir."

"Why are you lurking about here?" demanded Clair, since Sir John, after his outburst, did not seem inclined to speak.

"I followed Sir John here from London this afternoon, sir. As you had inhospitably forbidden me your house I was forced to listen at the window up there," and Bezkoﬀ waved his hand towards the terrace.

Newby shook himself like a big dog and growled. "And what business had you to listen? What business have you to follow me?" he demanded, in a threatening tone.

The Russian looked him squarely in the eyes. "I

"admit that such behaviour is 'shabby,'" he said, lightly, "and not quite what a gentleman of my country would do. But what would you?" with a French shrug. "I am a revolutionary, and have to do many things which otherwise I would scorn. You were good enough, Sir John, at one time, to have some sympathy with my unhappy country, so——"

"Never!" interrupted Sir John, violently. "It was Richard who approved of your mad schemes. Richard was just the sort of person to admire your crazy ideas. But this does not explain why you followed me?"

"I think it does, Sir John. Richard told me that you were in favour of a revolution in Russia, and I followed you to ask about funds for the cause."

"What insolence!" cried Mr Clair, angrily. "And I may tell you, Newby, that this man, thinking you were dead, came to me, when the will was being read, and induced me to ask him down on some such grounds. He declared that you favoured his schemes."

"I never did!" said Newby, emphatically.

"Ah, yes, now," remarked Bezkoﬀ, in a caressing tone. "Think over what your brother Richard said to you, and I feel certain that you will help the cause. As to you, Mr Clair"—he turned to the squire—"it was less on account of our friend here that you asked me down than because you feared I should accuse you of the murder."

"You did," said Clair, sharply, "and I turned you out."

"In your own house you were brave, Mr Clair, but when I hinted in London at my knowledge of your guilt you were sufficiently afraid to ask me down and try to pacify me."

"No," said Clair again, "I never purchased your silence."

"Quite so," said Bezkoﬀ, in his most silky voice. "I played my game of what the Americans call bluff very successfully for a time. When I induced you to bring me here, I fancied that the money was already mine. But in your own house you found courage enough to deft me, and so"—he shrugged—"the game was lost."

Clair looked at the young man with such supreme contempt that the Russian winced. Bezkoﬀ, apparently, was not yet hardened to the degrading tasks which his political fanaticism required him to perform.

"I shall leave you now," said Bezkoﬀ, retreating. "Sir John, we will meet in London, and then you will doubtless help us."

"You shall be arrested," vociferated Clair, following the Russian. "I will have you put in jail for blackmailing. Stop! Stop!" And, as Bezkoﬀ was still retreating, he plunged forward and tried to grasp him.

"Take care, old gentleman," said Bezkoﬀ, sneering, and stretched out his cane to stop Clair coming forward.

The squire furiously wrenched at it, and in so doing pulled away part of the stick, which proved to be the sheath of a slender rapier.

"You see," said the young man, pointing this weapon at Clair's breast. "I am well armed."

Mr Clair stood confounded, and Sir John intervened. "Let him go—let him go," he said, trying to suppress his fury; "we don't want a scandal."

"Let him go!" cried the squire, stamping. "Are you mad, Newby? This man tried to blackmail me, and he certainly kidnapped you."

"That is not true," said Bezkoﬀ, quickly.

"It is. You admit that the breast-pin is yours, and Newby——"

"I heard how he got it," interrupted Bezkoﬀ, hastily. "I was listening at the window, remember. I might say that some one else wore this breast-pin on the night in question. To other witnesses I could deny that it had ever belonged to me, and then," added Bezkoﬀ, smacking, "who could swear that I had anything to do with the disappearance of Sir John? And, on the other hand"—his voice became grave—"I could say that I saw Sir John stab his brother."

"Oh!" cried Newby, clenching his large hand, "you lie!"

"You know best if I do," said Bezkoﬀ, signifi-

cantly. "However, since it is useless to discuss these private matters in the presence of a third party, I shall go," and he bowed.

Clair hung down the sheath of the cane furiously. He was too frail to seize Bezkoﬀ himself, and Newby did not seem inclined to assist. But the squire, now certain that Bezkoﬀ could do nothing to him, since Richard and not John Newby was dead, decided to do what he could to punish him. "I'll call Hobson," he declared. "He is, I know, in the kitchen, as he comes to see after the tower." Trusk directed him to do so, to—

"To catch the murderer," said Bezkoﬀ, mockingly. "Well, here he is." He pointed with his bared rapier to Sir John. "Take him to gaol."

"Take you—take you!" cried the squire, in his shrill, worn voice; and set off running round the corner of the house in a surprising way for one so old and delicate. Newby turned to Bezkoﬀ, who was picking the other portion of his cane, off the ground to resheath the weapon.

"Go—go!" said Newby, hurriedly. "You will be arrested."

"Nonsense! The policeman has no warrant."

"Clair can give you in charge for trespass."

Bezkoﬀ started. "That puts a different complexion on affairs," he said, airily. "I thank you for teaching me this much of your law. I am also obliged to you for your solicitude for my safety. May I ask what it springs from?" And he laughed, like Mephistopheles, in the still clear light.

"I don't want a scandal," repeated Newby, who was much agitated. "Of course, I am innocent—but I was in the Grove. I *did* see my brother's corpse; and censorious people—"

"I understand," said Bezkoﬀ, cutting him short. "But I did not think that you would give in so easily."

"I have not given in at all," said the other, furiously. "But, for reasons which I need not give you, I don't want to be accused by you, Count Bezkoﬀ."

"What if I understand those reasons?"

"You cannot understand them."

"One of the Vowels might," said the Russian, significantly.

"What are you talking about?"

"Our society for the reformation of Russia is a very small one, and is directed by five people, who suppress their real names, and call themselves—in England, mind you!—by the vowel letters of your English alphabet: A, E, I, O, and U. Very convenient, isn't it? And I think that O might know of your reasons. He is high up in our society, you know. Ah! of course you know, Sir John. Why need I tell you all these things?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Newby, gruffly; but drops of perspiration were beading his brow.

"What, did not O—or, let me see, it was A—explain things to you in that Soho house, where——"

Sir John seized the Russian by the arm, and pushed him towards the avenue, as Clair, followed by the bulky form of Hobson, came quickly round the corner. "Go—go! You will be arrested for trespass."

"Au revoir, then, until we meet in London," said Bezkoﬀ, and walked lightly away.

"There he is! There he is!" cried Mr Clair. "Catch him! Lock him up! He is trespassing. I want him arrested. I give him in charge. A sovereign to you, Hobson, if you have him locked up to-night."

Hobson needed no incentive to carry out his official duties. Mr Clair had hinted that the murderer of Richard Newby was at hand, and that the charge of trespass was a mere excuse, so that he could be arrested out of hand. Clair was too breathless with his exertions to run; and Newby stood stolidly where he was, planted on the lawn. But the policeman, his soul on fire with ambition to arrest the Manor criminal, set off at a lumbering run as Bezkoﬀ turned at the corner of the avenue and waved his hand mockingly. When they both disappeared, Mr Clair looked at Sir John.

"Why didn't you help me to arrest him?" he asked, angrily. "The man kidnapped you. And I verily believe that he knows much more about the

murder of your brother than we give him credit for."

"I don't know if he did kidnap me after all, Clair," said Newby, and wiped his forehead with trembling hand.

"But the evidence of the breast-pin?"

"I may have been mistaken," stammered the other.

Mr Clair looked at his guest searchingly, in such light as remained.

The millionaire was usually a stolid, unemotional man; with a cast-iron will and an abrupt manner. But the interview with the gay young Russian seemed to have unnerved him, and he appeared to be a different sort of person altogether.

"I tell you what, Newby," said the squire, sharply. "You know something about this matter also."

"If you are talking of the murder, I do not," denied Sir John. "I found my brother dead, and was then kidnapped in the way I explained. But Richard was mixed up with these Anarchistic people, and——"

"And they killed him. It is just what villains like that would do," said Mr Clair, vigorously.

"I agree with you, and therefore I have to act carefully, lest I should be killed also."

"But you are not entangled with them?"

"No. But Richard was; and I am Richard's double in looks. And then—and then——" Sir John stopped and groaned. "I am placed in a very difficult position, Clair—a very difficult one indeed."

"I don't understand you," said Mr Clair, wonderingly.

"You never will, until——"

"Until what—until when, I mean?"

Sir John Newby looked towards Abbot Hufley's Tower bulking largely in the luminous twilight. "Until I have Bezkoﬀ's secret society, with its five of a council, in a trap." And after this somewhat enigmatic speech, Sir John refused to discuss the matter further.

Meanwhile, Bezkoﬀ was feeling very much astonished. From the glimpse he had caught of

Hobson's figure, he had thought that it would be easy to outrun him, but the big constable proved to be extraordinarily swift of foot. He hurled himself over the ground like an elephant in uniform, and, like the elephant, covered the miles with great rapidity. BezKoff, dancing along, found the policeman on him almost before he knew where he was. Then, indeed, did he set off at top speed for the railway station. He did not wish to be locked up, since questions dealing with the kidnapping of Newby might be asked. Of course, he felt sure that Sir John would hold his tongue; but Mr Clair, being as venomous as a serpent, would surely make trouble. As a member of a secret society, BezKoff wished to avoid examination and publicity, and cursed himself in his own beautiful language for thus having played with fire. And he cursed the more as he found himself unable to shake off Hobson, who pounded along like a traction engine.

Worse than this, the constable called on several people they passed to help him to catch the Russian; and shortly the cry of "Stop thief!" rang out loudly on the still night air. By the time the crooked street of Beltan village was reached quite a score of people tore at BezKoff's heels, and he saw now that his plight was serious. It was impossible to go to the railway station, as he would simply be arrested on the platform, and if he ran into the open country he would certainly be captured, since he did not know the lie of the land, and his pursuers could come up with him by side roads. It was necessary to seek shelter somewhere, and BezKoff raced through Beltan village at top speed. So quick a spurt did he put on that he was through the village and beyond it before any stir could be created. His pursuers were a good distance behind, so now, if at any time, was the moment to seek a harbour of refuge.

As luck would have it, BezKoff passed by the Minter cottage, and by chance Willy was leaning over the gate, waiting for Hallon and Billy, whom she expected back from London. The Count saw a pretty woman looking at him in amazement as he sprang along; and, with an intuition which almost amounted to genius, swerved aside in his course to

leap the fence. Willy screamed, as well she might. Bezkoﬀ rapidly explained, and gave his name.

"Mr Clair wants to have me arrested for trespass," he said, breathlessly, and with much gesticulation. "They are after me—save me! I can put myself right in your eyes. You are a woman! Save—ah!"

His ejaculation was caused by a sight of Hobson and his horde sweeping round the corner. Before they could catch sight of him, Bezkoﬀ dropped behind the quickset hedge, which concealed him entirely from the road, and clutched at Willy's dress. "Save me!" he murmured.

CHAPTER XVII

WILLY intended to save him. The moment she heard his name she made up her mind to secure his liberty, if only to have a conversation with him. This was the Russian who had tried to blackmail Mr Clair, and it was more than probable that he knew much about the crime. Miss Minter shivered as she thought that a possible murderer, and a known blackmailer, was gripping her dress. Nevertheless, for Dorothy and Percy's sake, she held herself well in hand. At any price, she was determined to prevent her friend becoming Lady Newby; and some timely information extracted from Bezkoﬀ's gratitude might—as Willy put it to herself—save the situation. She therefore still continued to lean over the gate, and smile.

"Keep quiet," she whispered. "I'll save you."

Hobson shot past, puffing and blowing like a grampus, but one or two of those who followed stopped to question Willy. "We thought we heard you scream, miss," said a respectable elderly barber. "Did you see the thief?"

"I saw a man running," said Willy, equably, "and I screamed because his face was so wild. He went up there, where the policeman has gone. I expect he is making for Axleigh. What has he done?"

"He's a thief, miss—a thief!" shouted the barber, who had picked up wrong information from Hobson's gasping statement. "Come on, lads, we'll have him in gaol in a jiffy!" and away the whole gang went on their exciting man-hunt.

"Brutes!" said Willy, in disgust. "Get up, Count Bezkoﬀ, and come inside. You must answer me a few questions."

"I am at your service, mademoiselle," said the

Russian, thankfully, although he was surprised at her speech. "You have saved me."

"I am not so sure of that. You may be in gaol yet."

"Oh, no! Shortly, when all is quiet, I can steal away to a distant railway station and return to London unobserved."

"You would be arrested in no time," said Willy, crossly. "Come in here"—opening the door of the tiny drawing-room—"and when you have explained things to me I'll help you to get away. That is, if you tell me the truth."

"But I do not understand, mademoiselle," stammered Bezkoﬀ, as Willy turned up the lamp, and looked at him; "you know me not."

"Oh, yes I do," snapped Willy. "I am Miss Minter, and the most intimate friend of Miss Clair. She told me how you tried to blackmail her father. Shame to you, sir!"

Bezkoﬀ grew red, and then pale, and felt abashed before this tall, handsome girl, whose face was at once so beautiful and so severe. Miss Minter, on her side, was secretly surprised to find the Russian so very handsome. He looked like the fairy prince from a D'Aulnoy story, and she marvelled that so good-looking a young man should behave so basely. The Russian had quite lost his composure, and flushed and stammered and looked confused, while Willy eyed him as sternly as a hanging judge. She would have found her task easier had he not been so extremely like a Greek god of the lady novelist's creation.

"We have only ten minutes to speak," said Willy, looking at the clock, "for I am expecting my brother and Mr Hallon back soon. Answer my question honestly, Count Bezkoﬀ."

"I owe you everything, Miss Minter, and I shall answer what I can."

"Then tell me. Who killed Richard Newby?"

Bezkoﬀ started. "I do not know," he said, promptly.

"Did not the spy, who was watching Sir John—Miss Clair told me about him—say that the squire had stabbed him?"

"The squire?" stuttered Bezkoﬀ.

"Mr Clair. You know whom I mean," said Willy, impatiently.

"There was a spy, certainly," admitted the Russian slowly, "but he did not see the blow struck."

"Yet you dared to accuse Mr Clair of the murder."

"I was forced to," muttered Bezkoﬀ, looking down, shamefaced.

"By whom?" she demanded, imperiously.

"By the five heads of our secret society for the regeneration of Russia. Ah! do not look at me so severely, Miss Minter. No one could have hated the task more than I did. But I was forced."

"No gentleman need be forced," said Willy, scathingly.

"You do not know—you do not understand. The Vowels——"

"The what?"

"The five men who direct our society call themselves the Vowels. I cannot explain now. It would take too long; and, again, it might cost me my life. Oh, I am in earnest! You do not know how I am compelled to obey. I joined the society unknowingly. I never thought of the methods this association would adopt; and then I had a strong reason to join, and, Miss Minter"—he broke off entreatingly—"come to London, to this address"—he lunged her a card. "I can explain everything, and you will find that I am not so base as you deem me. Suffer me now to go; I can escape easily. I can hide in a ditch; they will only watch the stations along the line, and I can manage—that is, don't trouble. I am safe now."

Willy placed herself between him and the door. "I want to know who killed Richard Newby!" she said, resolutely.

"I swear that I do not know."

"Was it Sir John?"

"I cannot say—there is no time to explain. Why do you wish to know?"

"Because I don't want Sir John to marry Dorothy Clair."

"I heard about that," said Bezkoﬀ, quickly; then reflected. "Miss Minter, when you come to see me

- in London I can explain everything. Meanwhile, rest content. Miss Clair shall not marry Sir John."
- "You promise that?"

Bezkoﬀ caught her hand and kissed it. "I swear it!" and forthwith disappeared. When she went out into the garden he was nowhere to be seen. Like a shadow he had departed. Willy placed the card in her pocket.

Needless to say, Willy did not relate her adventure to Hallon and her brother. She fancied—and with some reason—that they would blame her for allowing the Russian to escape, since, had he been arrested on the minor charge of trespass, he might have been forced to explain his connection with the murder. And that he knew something of this seemed very certain, since he had threatened Mr Clair. In fact, taking all circumstances into consideration, it was likely that the crime was the work of this Anarchistic Society.

- Had Bezkoﬀ been less good-looking Willy might have dealt less leniently with him. But for all her cleverness and self-control she was a woman at heart, and, therefore, in her relations with the Russian, the feeling of sex came into play. Also, he had admired her; she saw that plainly, and therefore felt confident that, given time and place, she could—as the saying goes—twist him round her finger. This she intended to do, in order to elucidate the mystery of Richard Newby's death, since she was anxious that Dorothy should marry Percy. There would be no chance of this with Sir John in the field, and with Mr Clair on the side of Sir John, until the problem was solved. In her own heart Willy believed that the millionaire had something to do with the crime, if, indeed, he had not committed the same himself. If, therefore, he could be implicated in some way, or if he could be proved to be the guilty person, Dorothy would certainly be set free to marry Hallon. This was Miss Minter's scheme, and after that hurried interview with Bezkoﬀ she believed that he would be able to assist her.

And in any case, as the girl reflected, hopefully, Bezkoﬀ had promised that a marriage between Miss Clair and Sir John should not take place. How the

Russian proposed to stop it Willy could not guess, unless he intended to denounce the millionaire. She would have to meet Bezkoﬀ in London, since, after the pursuit, he could scarcely shew himself at Beltan with safety—and then could hear his explanation regarding his association with the secret society. Willy felt sure that in some way Bezkoﬀ was not so unscrupulous as he appeared to be, and that it was against his nature to indulge in blackmailing tricks. But here the female heart spoke, and the handsome Russian was judged guiltless by Miss Minter, when an ugly man would have been considered guilty. This was weak, and Willy admitted to herself that her emotions were certainly not under control. But having come to a resolution to hear Bezkoﬀ's defence before condemning him—and surely that was only fair, said her heart insidiously—she kept her own counsel. Later she could travel to London and interview the Russian at the address on his card.

Dorothy still declined to receive Sir John's marriage proposal, so her father behaved quite in a Roman way. He did not confine her altogether to her room, but said that she was not to leave the grounds. As Newby stopped on for a few days, and Dorothy did not wish to meet him and subject herself to a second wooing, she stayed in her bedroom nearly all the day, and only ventured out when she knew that the millionaire was safely engaged in conversation with Mr Clair. But twice and thrice the girl wrote to Hallon, who could not enter the grounds or call at the Manor, and Jules Schwytz acted as Cupid's messenger. The meek little butler adored Dorothy, as, when he had been ill, she had been kind to him; therefore he was glad to assist her, especially as he hated Mr Clair, who behaved very haughtily to the timid foreigners. Lady Panwin remained neutral, and ceased to speak to Dorothy about Hallon or Newby. Clair insisted that his sister should point out to Dorothy that it was her duty to save the House of Clair by marrying Sir John, but the gaunt, grim old woman resolutely declined the responsibility. "And I see no reason to speak of marriage until the mystery of this crime is solved," said Lady Panwin.

What puzzled Mr Clair in connection with this was

the attitude of Newby. When he had escaped from captivity he had talked largely of hunting down his brother's murderer, but of late his zeal had grown cold, and he lingered for three days at the Manor without making any attempt to attend to the business. He did not even offer a reward, and, as the police could not find the Soho house wherein Sir John declared he had been imprisoned, no clue was discoverable likely to elucidate the whole strange business. Newby had walked through Soho with Swanson, in the hope of recognising the house. But all the houses and the streets of this quarter were so like one another, and Sir John had been so confused when he had hurriedly escaped, that it was impossible to arrive at any conclusion. The prison of Newby might have been in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land for all the existence it seemed to have on earth.

Of course, the newspapers for a few days were full of the kidnapping, and this, in conjunction with a revived interest in the murder, set every one talking. All kinds of theories were advanced by amateur detectives, and all sorts of solutions were offered, but no one seemed to hit upon any evidence likely to reveal the truth. The assassin, or assassins, of Richard Newby could not be found, and the trail had been covered up very cleverly. Swanson confessed that he could not see his way, and Inspector Trusk, of Axleigh, declined to consider the case further. Hobson had reported the trespass and escape of Count Bezkoﬀ to Trusk, but the inspector never thought for one moment that the Russian had anything to do with the case. Had he known how Sir John Newby had favoured the escape of Bezkoﬀ he might have thought that the millionaire had killed his brother, like another Cain; or, if not, that he approved so greatly of the murder that he would not lift one finger to trace the assassin.

CHAPTER XVIII,

"You really ought to do something, Newby," said Mr Clair, on the third day of Sir John's stay at the Manor; and he spoke testily. "Unless you offer a reward, people will think it strange."

"Let them," said Sir John, gruffly. "My business has nothing to do with any one."

"But this business, concerns the safety of the public," argued the squire, earnestly. "It is wicked to permit a murderer to be at large."

"How can I help it, Clair?"

"By tracing the man. Offer a reward—set these clever wits of yours to work, and hunt him down."

"That is easier said than done," replied Newby, drily. "I am not a heaven-born detective."

"Swanson may be. Trusk may be. Stimulate their brain-power by giving a reward. Upon my word, I cannot understand you, Newby. You seem to have changed."

Sir John shifted uneasily in his seat. "Such a shock, as I have had would change any one," he remarked, quietly.

"Yes—in a way. But you used to be so practical, and determined, and so bent upon having your own way. Now you seem to be undecided how to act, and appear to be content to stay here and do nothing."

"I don't want to go to town and be tormented by reporters and interviewers," said Newby, angrily. "I remain here for the sake of quietness, and until I can get over the shock I have sustained. Then I'll return and set to work—perhaps."

"What do you mean by perhaps?" asked Clair, sharply.

Sir John twiddled his thumbs, and looked at the ground. "To tell you the truth, Clair," he said, slowly, and in a tired voice, "I fear to search for the assassin of Richard, lest my name should be dragged in the mud. As I told you, and as you know from personal observation, my brother was a scoundrel, who could not run straight. He forged my name to several cheques, and was connected with that Vowel Society, of which Bezkoﬀ spoke. Judging from that letter sent, to me, and which Richard intercepted, some one, or some people—perhaps members of this society—knew things about him which were shameful." If I hunt down the murderer, or murderers, I may hear of things which would cover me with shame and my name with mud. And, in a case like this, to do justice I should have to make all these things—whatever they may be—public. Can you wonder, then, that I shrink from stirring up muddy water?"

"No," said Clair, after a pause. "And yet it is unlike you, Newby. At one time you would have done justice regardless of what the public thought. I always deemed you too strong a man to be influenced by what people said or did. It seems," added Mr Clair, with a touch of sarcasm, "that I am mistaken."

"I'll think over the matter," said Sir John, quietly. "And when I feel quite able to deal with the subject of Richard's murder I'll see what is best to be done. Personally—it may seem callous of me to say this—but, personally, I am quite sure that Richard deserved his fate. He was a bad lot, and a curse to every one who knew him."

"Mrs Broll would not say so," said Clair, significantly.

"Martha is prejudiced."

"One thing strikes me as strange in what you say," remarked the squire, musingly. "You talk of murderers in the plural. Do you, then, think that more than one person killed Richard?"

"More than one person kidnapped me," said Sir John, grimly, "and more than one person must have taken the body to the vault under the tower."

"H'm, yes. It might be so. But how did these persons know where the vault was?"

"I can't say." Newby shrugged his massive

shoulders. "Find out who stole that plan from the book, and you may learn."

"I can't find out who tore the page out," said Clair, in vexed tones, "although I have questioned all the servants. Of course, many people have been in the library. Archæologists who came to see the ruins, and neighbours, and such like people. But I know of none who would take the plan."

"An archæologist might," said Newby, with interest, "if only to trace the windings of these catacombs. Indeed, I think it is very likely. Think of the names of the archæologists you have had here, Clair, and you may learn who tore out the drawing."

"Pooh! Pooh! Pooh! These archæologists are all respectable," said Mr Clair, with contempt. "I would not insult them by such questions. I think, Newby, you had better begin at the other end. Go to London and find out, if possible, the number of the house in Soho where you were held prisoner. Then question those who live in it, and gradually the truth may come to light. You owe it to society to discover the assassin of your brother. Also," added Mr Clair, with emphasis, "you owe it to me. I don't want this disagreeable mystery to continue hanging over the house of my ancestors. It is most unpleasant."

"Well," said Sir John, slowly, "I'll go to London to-morrow, since you think it best."

"I do think it best," said Mr Clair, very pleased. "And I am glad you are willing to take my advice. This is the first time you have done so, often though I have offered it before. I really think, Newby, that this murder and kidnapping have a very softening effect on your too hard character. You are not so—pardon me—pig-headed as you used to be. That is an improvement."

Newby surveyed the weak face of the man who spoke thus with a grim smile. "I may recover my hardness," he said, quietly. "I told you that I was waiting my time to trap this Vowel Society."

"I don't understand."

"There is no reason that you should until the time comes," said Newby, quietly. "Meanwhile, I shall go to London to-morrow, as I have stated. But before

"I go I must see Dorothy, and she must accept me. If she refuses——" He hesitated.

"Yes?" said Mr Clair, in an apprehensive voice.

Sir John rose, and stretched his big body. "I need not explain what will happen then," he said, gruffly; "it wouldn't be polite, since I am your guest." And he strolled away, leaving the squire to digest the threat at his leisure.

Mr Clair knew perfectly well, that the millionaire alluded to the mortgage, and that if Dorothy still proved recalcitrant the home of his fathers would know him no more. This being the case, and Newby being a man of his word, it was necessary to induce the girl to sacrifice herself on the family altar. Clair sought out Lady Panwin, in the hope that she would assist to hale Dorothy to the stone of sacrifice. He explained himself at full length.

"And you must insist on Dorothy coming to dinner to-night," said Mr Clair, looking haggard, as well he might. "Newby goes back to town to-morrow, and she must accept him this evening."

"I'll have nothing to do with it!" said Lady Panwin, looking as grim as Rhadamanthus.

"Selina! You shock me!"

"Better that than to shock my own sense of what is right. It is a shame to make a pretty girl like my niece marry a fat, red-faced old vulgarian like Sir John Newby."

"He is vulgar, I grant you. But since his kidnapping he is not red-faced, and certainly he is less stout."

"Francis," said Lady Panwin, sitting up very straight, "before all this trouble began I admit I was in favour of the match, as I did not entirely dislike Sir John and I know that we want money. But Dorothy is now in love with Mr Hallon, who is a most estimable young man, while Sir John appears to have changed for the worse."

"He has changed I admit, Selina, but his money has not diminished. And, to save this house, Dorothy must marry him. Argue with her, and——"

"And waste my breath! Certainly not! I shall tell her to come down to dinner, and you can argue on your own account."

Thus it came about that Dorothy appeared in the dining-room, looking pale, but as pretty as ever. Nor did she seem to resent Sir John's tender behaviour, as formerly she had done. Mr Clair argued from this that she was coming to her senses, and would sacrifice herself gladly to save the tumble-down home of her ancestors. Had he known that Dorothy's appearance at the meal and changed manner were due to a letter from Willy, smuggled in by the butler, he might not have been so pleased. Willy wrote mysteriously saying that the marriage with Sir John could never take place, and that at the eleventh hour it would be prevented. Dorothy did not know what Willy meant, but she had every confidence in her friend's judgment and belief in her word. For this reason she issued from her seclusion, and accepted Newby's attentions with some complacency, waiting for the bolt from the blue which would shatter him. So Dorothy behaved very well, both at dinner and after. Mr Clair was delighted, and mentally thanked heaven that his child was worthy of him.

In the drawing-room, Sir John began to pay lover-like attentions to Dorothy, while Lady Panwin took up her tatting and worked with a set mouth and a fierce determination. Mr Clair read his morning paper, which he invariably kept until this late hour. Everything was calm and peaceful and dull, until the butler appeared with a card for Mr Clair.

"A lady to see monsieur," said Jules, carrying his silver salver across to the squire.

"At this hour!" Mr Clair took the card and murmured the name to himself: "'Miss Amy Sanding.' I wonder who she is."

"You had better ask her!" said Lady Panwin, pausing in her tatting. "Shew her in here, Jules."

"No," said Mr Clair, with a reproachful glance at his sister, and an inclination of his head in the direction of the elderly lover. "Shew her into the library, Jules."

"She is there now, monsieur."

"Then I shall go to her," said Mr Clair, and took his departure.

Sir John, busy with his compliments, did not attend to this little comedy. Lady Panwin went on with

her work, unconscious that the hour was big with Fate. She thought that some person had called to see Mr Clair on business, as he had several lady tenants. Perhaps it was Mrs Folks, whom Mr Clair had seen on the evening of the murder. Mrs Folks was always wanting her cottage repaired, and Lady Panwin sighed to think that it might be this pertinacious person. Francis could spare no money to improve his property, unless— She glanced in the direction of the lovers, and was secretly surprised to see the composure with which Dorothy received Sir John's advances. "Can it be that she is willing to marry him?" thought Lady Panwin; and all the romance within her revolted at such a union of May and December.

Quite ignorant of this unamiable opinion, Newby murmured explanations to the girl about his lonely life, and deep love for her, and his ardent desire to give her a large income and a title. "You shall be a queen!" said Sir John, softly.

"Queens nowadays do not have a very happy life," fenced Dorothy.

"Then you shall be as happy as a butterfly."

"And as useless."

"With the money, I can give you there will be no need for you to do anything useful, save love me."

"What a strange way to characterise love," said Dorothy, her lip curling. "I really must decline."

"No; no!" urged Sir John. "Think over things." And he again began to explain how devoted he could and would be.

Mr Clair returned to the drawing-room looking very white, and with an angry gleam in his eyes. Lady Panwin looked at him questioningly. But, taking no notice of her, he walked across to Newby.

"How dare you make love to my daughter!" was Clair's unexpected address. "How dare you deceive me!"

Sir John rose, looking aghast, and so did Dorothy and her aunt. All three thought that the squire had taken leave of his senses. "What do you mean?" demanded Newby, in an astonished voice.

Mr Clair walked to the door, and opened it again to admit a tall, thin, washed-out-looking lady,

fashionably dressed, and with a defiant manner. She raised a lorgnette, and looked at the millionaire indignantly.

"Permit me," said Clair, sarcastically, "to introduce you to your wife!"

CHAPTER XIX

DOROTHY uttered an ejaculation of surprise. If this was the bolt from the blue hinted at in Willy's letter, it was the last kind of bolt she expected to fall. Lady Panwin said nothing, but closed her mouth tightly and looked more grim than ever. Sir John's face was in the shadow of the curtains, and the expression could not be seen; but Miss Sanding—or, rather, Lady Newby—glared at him with an expression which boded ill for his domestic peace.

"Well," said Clair, impatiently, since Sir John held his tongue, "and what have you to say for acting like a scoundrel?"

"That is a strong expression," replied Newby, weakly.

"It is the right one," declared the squire, indignantly. "You entered my house under false pretences, as a bachelor, and tried to entrap my poor daughter into a false marriage."

"I always thought that you favoured it," said Sir John, drily, and not looking so shamefaced as he should have done. "Also I may say that you are very ready to believe evil of me, Mr Clair. This lady suddenly appears and calls me her husband. You credit her without asking me if it is true."

"Can you deny it, John?" asked the strange lady, speaking for the first time, and Dorothy noticed how distinct was her enunciation.

Newby started, and looked at her steadily, still keeping his face in the shadow of the curtains.

"No," he said, after a pause, "I do not deny it."

"Then you admit that Miss Sanding is your wife?" demanded Clair, in a cold fury at having been tricked. "You scoundrel!"

Sir John advanced his head, and his face came into the lamplight. It did not wear a particularly agreeable expression.

"Take care, sir," he snarled, shewing his strong white teeth. "If you try me too far, I may turn you out of this place!"

"But Mr Clair was too indignant to be careful, as advised. "You have insulted me; you have insulted my daughter."

"I am very glad Sir John has, in this way," said Dorothy, cheerfully. "But we have not heard Miss Sanding's story."

"Lady Newby, if you please, Miss Clair," said the other woman, in a stately manner. "My story, as you are pleased to call it, is very short and painful. I am an actress—a comedy actress of great, and I may say, deserved reputation."

Lady Panwin sniffed. "On and off the stage?" she asked, spitefully.

Miss Sanding—it will be convenient to call her so—flared up like tow at this very feminine speech.

"Both off and on, madam," she declared, quite in histrionic style. "No one can say a word against me. In several well-known newspapers I have been called the Vestal of the Drama. If my husband"—Miss Sanding turned on Newby with the defiant air of outraged virtue, in melodrama—"if he thinks to divorce me, he is mistaken. I am spotless." Miss Sanding here crossed her arms on her breast in a Christian martyr attitude.

"Nobody wants to divorce you," said Newby, testily.

"You do not call me by my name, John."

"I'm keeping that for our private conversation. These domestic details cannot interest the present company."

"But they do," said Mr Clair. "I want to know upon what grounds the lady claims to be your wife."

"My certificate of marriage is with my lawyers," said the actress, and her pale face became an angry red. "Don't cast aspersions on my character, Mr Clair. I am John's wife. Let him deny it if he can."

"I have already admitted it," said Newby, stolidly. "But I thought that you were dead long ago."

"Dead!" cried Miss Sanding, raising herself on tip-toe to produce an effect. "When I have been winning laurels in America!"

"There was that railway smash, you know," Sir John reminded her.

"I was in it; yes, I admit that I was in it. But I escaped safe in life and limb. A false report of my death was sent to England, and on that, I presume, you courted this young lady. But had you cared for me, John, you would have made inquiries, and would have learnt the truth. But I returned a month ago to my Hamstead home, and heard of your death and afterwards of your return from the grave. Gossip, busy with your name, said that you were engaged to marry Miss Clair, the daughter of the owner of this Manor, so I came down to save her."

Newby nodded, and turned to Mr Clair. "Do you wish to know any more?" he asked, drily.

"Yes," said that gentleman, violently. "Why did you not tell me that you were already married?"

"Thinking that I was a widower these three years, I did not consider that confession was necessary. But the report of my wife's death was false, it seems, and here she is alive. I see no reason for you to look at me so indignantly, Mr Clair. I have not behaved wrongly."

"You should have told me the truth," said Mr Clair, doggedly, but beginning to see that Newby was not so much to blame as had at first appeared. "I have known you for years, and I never heard that you had a wife."

"Allow me to explain," said Miss Sanding, taking the centre of the drawing-room from stage habit. "I was a romantic girl ten years ago, and when the rising millionaire wooed me, I consented to the experiment of a secret marriage."

"Why secret and why experimental?" asked Lady Panwin, putting up her lorgnette to examine Miss Sanding, as a naturalist would an insect under a microscope.

"I was a romantic girl," said the actress again, "and determined to return to the stage should my marriage prove a failure. Therefore I kept the fact secret, as, in my opinion, it would have harmed me

with the managers. Sir John consented, for reasons best known to himself."

"Quite so—quite so," murmured the millionaire, who was listening very intently.

"And my marriage was a failure," cried Miss Sanding, clasping her hands in a tragic manner. "Romance was wedded to materialism. I had hoped for a Romeo, and I found—I found—well"—with a deep sigh—"it matters not what I found. But unhappiness was my portion, and I fled."

"With someone else?" asked Lady Panwin.

"No!" snapped Miss Sanding, tartly, and forgetting her stage airs and graces. "I returned to the stage, and afterwards went to America. I am bound to say that my husband allowed me a decent income, and I need not have gone again on the boards. But I did." Miss Sanding became artificial again. "Why should I have deprived my country of a great star? But now—now"—she glanced in a near mirror at her somewhat sketchy appearance—"now that my ambitions are realised I shall retire to the arms of my husband as Lady Newby."

"Very good," said Mr Clair, angrily. "Retire straight away. Newby, you had better leave my house."

"You turned Bezkoﬀ out of your house and he returned," said the millionaire, quietly. "I may return also."

"The mortgage shall be paid," said Mr Clair, grandly.

"I said nothing about foreclosing the mortgage," said Newby, drily.

"Then you won't—"

"I shall do nothing at present. Things can remain as they are until the mystery of my brother's death is cleared up. Then I shall return here, to explain how you have misjudged me. Miss Clair"—he turned to Dorothy—"since it appears that my wife is still alive, I have to ask your pardon for forcing my attentions on you. But, believe me, they were dictated by true love, and I was quite under the delusion that Lady Newby"—he looked at the tragic woman who was posing in the lamplight—"had gone to her long home."

"Like yourself," said Miss Sanding, in a thrilling voice, "I have returned from that bourse whence no traveller, as the bard wrongfully says, ever comes back."

"Miss Clair," said Sir John, taking no notice of this appeal to the gallery, "you will forgive me?"

"Yes," answered Dorothy, offering her hand. She had never liked Sir John so much as she did now, and quite saw that he had wooed her in all innocence. Lady Panwin also was pleased—perhaps because she saw that, this obstacle being removed, Dorothy would be able to marry Percy Hallon.

"Sir John," said Lady Panwin, also offering her hand. "You have my profound esteem for the way in which you have acted in a very trying situation."

"Mr Clair does not give me his esteem," said Newby, quickly.

"I admit that I have called you a scoundrel, wrongfully," said Clair, in a grudging manner. "Apparently you did not know that your wife was alive and kicking."

"I never kick," said Miss Sanding, in an awful voice. "And I certainly can testify that Sir John deemed me dead, since we had been parted for years and never wrote to one another."

"Then"—Clair turned to Newby—"you will remain here for the night?"

"Thank you, no," said Sir John, with all courtesy. "I shall take my wife up to London. Perhaps you will order my clothes to be packed, as I have not brought a valet with me. Also send for a fly. We will go up by the ten-thirty. Will you take my arm?" he added, advancing towards his wife.

"Call me Amy," whispered that lady.

"Will you take my arm, Amy?" said Sir John, imperturbably.

"This," said Miss Sanding, as she obeyed, "repays me for years of untold agony."

Then she drew her husband towards the drawing-room door and tried to think of an effective speech upon which to exit. But, not having had the part of a restored wife written for her, she could not conceive what would be best to say. Newby saved the situation.

"Come along," he remarked, bluffly and gruffly; "there's no time to be lost. I must get away at once."

Then the door closed upon the reunited pair. Mr Clair sank into a seat, looking profoundly miserable. Lady Panwin took up her fanning as though nothing had happened, and Dorothy stood undecidedly where she was. In Mr Clair's present state of dejection she did not know exactly what to say. It was as dangerous to approach him as it would have been to touch an African lion.

"It's a dreadful business," said the squire, after a dead pause.

"Very," assented his sister, calmly. "But it is better we should learn the truth now than later, when Dorothy might have been married."

Dorothy was about to say that she would never have married Sir John, when her aunt looked at her warningly, as if to hint that it was useless to arouse her father by a futile explanation. "And after all, Francis," went on the old dame, "Sir John is not to blame."

"I am not so sure of that," said Mr Clair, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "A man does not go courting until he is quite sure that his first wife is dead."

"If he happens to have a first wife, Francis. But Miss Sanding—or, rather I should call her Lady Newby—was evidently reported dead in a railway accident in the States. It is possible that Sir John inquired carefully and found out that she was a corpse."

"But she wasn't!" cried the squire, wrathfully. "And if she was appearing in America, he must have seen the name."

"Not necessarily, unless he reads the American newspapers."

"I think he has behaved very badly," said Clair, in a dogged manner.

"Well, let us give him the benefit of the doubt," said Lady Panwin, in an amiable manner. "It will not do to make him angry. He seems inclined to leave that mortgage alone, so we had better let sleeping dogs lie."

"I am glad that the mortgage is allowed to remain," said Mr Clair, in anything but a grateful tone. "All the same, it will be difficult to make both ends meet. What misfortunes I have had of late!" he wailed. "I have lost the two thousand a year because Newby came to life; and now I have lost him as a son-in-law. I fear that our fortunes will never mend. We shall all die in a workhouse. It is your fault, Dorothy. Everything was going smoothly until you went to the crypt and turned the Devil's Ace."

"I didn't turn the Ace, father," said the girl quickly. "And even if I had, the misfortune had already occurred, seeing that the body was on the table. Ugh!" She shuddered, as she always did when thinking of that gruesome experience.

"It will be best in my opinion," said Lady Panwin, laying down her work and removing her lorgnette, through which she had been looking at the downcast face of her brother—"in my opinion, it will be better, Francis," she added, with emphasis, "if you are attending to what I say."

"Yes—what is it?" asked the squire, mechanically.

"It will be better to allow Dorothy to renew her engagement with Mr Hallon," said Lady Panwin, finally.

"It was never broken!" cried Dorothy, indignantly.

Both of them expected an outburst from Mr Clair, but the old gentleman had gone through too much to have the strength to work himself into a rage. "Hallon is not rich," he said, discontentedly. "He is agreeable enough, I admit, and may get on. But we must bring money into the family in some way."

"Not by marriage!" said the girl, flushing.

Mr Clair shrugged his shoulders in a resigned way. "You must please yourself," he said, drearily. "I can't live very long; and as the mortgage must be paid, I suppose Newby will come and reside here when I am in my grave."

"No," said Dorothy, eagerly. "I have been talking to Percy, and we are going to look for Abbot Hurler's treasure."

"You'll never find it," said her father, bitterly;

"and, if you did, the Crown or the Church would take it all."

"No, Francis, no. You would get a share."

"Not enough to pay off this mortgage and keep the Manor House in our family, however. Dorothy, you can tell Mr Hallon to call again."

"Dear father!" She wreathed her arms round his neck. "Then you consent to my marriage with him?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" said Clair, testily. "If he fulfils his promise, and learns who killed Richard Newby."

Lady Panwin looked up in surprise. "Do you still hold him to that?"

"Yes, I do. Certainly, he was to discover the murderer of Sir John; but as our friend is now alive the assassin of Richard must be traced. I want the slur on the Manor removed."

"But no one now can think you have anything to do with the matter, father," said Dorothy.

"I know that, child. All the same, I want to know the truth. Newby may not always be so kind about the mortgage; and I want the truth to come to light, so that he may never take the house away."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Lady Panwin, sternly.

Clair glanced at the door. "I believe that Newby has something to do with the murder," he said, softly.

"And you want to know the truth, so as to hold it over him like a whip!" said Lady Panwin, rising angrily. "Francis, if I thought that you meant what you say, I should leave your house this night."

"I meant nothing of the sort," said Clair, peevishly, shifting his ground. "But Newby wants the matter put right, and if Hallon can help him, he may give the mortgage to Dorothy as a wedding gift."

"Hum!" said Lady Panwin, scornfully. "You are growing old, Francis. If Sir John, as you hint, is concerned in this crime, why should he want the matter sifted?"

"Because I think that until the truth comes to light he will be in danger of blackmail!"

"From whom?" asked Dorothy, staring.

"From that young scoundrel Bezkoﬀ. If Newby were not afraid of Bezkoﬀ, he would not have permitted him to go the other night. That Russian knows the truth, and he will use it to force money from Newby."

"But surely you don't think that Sir John killed his brother?" said Lady Panwin, genuinely perplexed.

"Oh, no. But he was on the spot at the time, and found the body. These scoundrels who kidnapped him may say that he is guilty."

"I believe that Sir John is innocent myself," said Dorothy in her most emphatic voice.

"So do I," nodded her aunt. "He behaved very well when that woman entered the room. And you, Francis?"

"Yes, I believe that Newby is innocent," said the squire, wrinkling his forehead; "and yet his manner is so strange that I can make nothing of him. But let Hallon learn the truth, and when all is settled you can marry. It is a forlorn hope; still, we must try it."

"I hope Mr Hallon will never learn the truth if its coming to light will put a halter round Sir John's neck," said Lady Panwin.

At this moment the millionaire entered, and Lady Panwin started, wondering if he had overheard. Apparently he had not, for he walked up to Clair in the most unconcerned manner. "The fly is at the door," said Newby, quietly, "and my wife is in it. Good-bye, Clair."

"You won't stay?" said the squire, growing red.

"No. It is better that I should go back to town."

"Remember that I do not turn you out."

"Yes, yes!" Newby smiled strangely. "I am not angry with you in the least, Clair. Things looked black against me, I admit; but you will find later on that I am not quite a scoundrel. Miss Clair! Lady Panwin!" He bowed politely.

"Good-bye, Sir John," said Dorothy, impulsively, seizing his hand. "And I hope I'll see you soon again."

"I hope not," said Newby, shaking his head and

walking to the door. "But you *will* see me again, Miss Clair, not soon, but late, when——"

"Yes. When?"

"When my character is completely cleared. Good-bye!"

"Now, what does that mean?" asked Dorothy, when the door closed, and received no reply. For who could answer such a question?

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CHAPTER XX

JULES SCHWYTZ, the Swiss butler, was a great favourite with the other servants of the Manor House. In the first place, he was very meek, and easily guided by the female sex; in the second, he was by no means bad-looking, in a mild way; in the third place, he could sing French songs with the voice of a lark. Certainly those in the kitchen could not understand the foreign language, but Jules made his meaning so clear with emphasis and gesticulation that they thought they knew all about it. The cook often declared that Beltan would be a desert but for this amusing alien.

Dorothy also liked Jules, who was always ready to do what she wanted. Lady Panwin and Mr Clair never took any notice of the little man, save to order him about; but his young mistress was kinder. When Jules fell ill, Dorothy, without telling her aunt—who was something of a dragon—took him books and port wine. Consequently, when Jules recovered, he vowed himself to the service of this angel maiden. He was only too ready to carry notes to Percy, when Mr Clair had forbidden that young gentleman the house, and would have done more had Dorothy asked him.

The next day Dorothy sent a note by Jules—although there was no need of secrecy now—to Hallon, saying that the interdict had been removed, and that he could come again to the Manor House. Jules returned with the dismal intelligence that Mr Hallon had gone out with his host and hostess for the day. Dorothy felt rather gloomy when she heard this; but she could not blame Percy, since he had not known that he had been permitted to return to

Paradise. She betook herself to the garden, and sat on the well-known seat under the Dancing Faun, wondering how she could pass the time until her lover returned in the evening. Naturally, her thoughts strayed in the direction of Sir John Newby and his possible guilt. She could not bring herself to believe that he was really guilty, and yet—as her father had stated—his behaviour was peculiar. He was not quite the Sir John she had known. He seemed less firm, less domineering; and the change, in some respects, was for the better. Sometimes—as when his wife arrived on the previous night—she liked him very well; then, again, a trifling action on his part would almost make her dislike him. It was extremely strange, she thought, that the millionaire should have changed so. Dorothy had always believed Newby to be a man of iron, and could not think that even a shock, such as he certainly had experienced, could so alter his nature.

But of one thing Dorothy was confident: that her father would not permit her to marry Percy until the mystery of Richard Newby's death was solved. Hallon would have to do this, and bring the assassin to the gallows; but Dorothy did not see how he could set about it. There appeared to be no starting point. Then, after some reflection, she began to think that it would be best for Percy to go to Soho, and, if possible, trace the house wherein Sir John had been held prisoner. Then he might learn something likely to shew who had kidnapped the millionaire; and if the kidnappers were discovered, they would probably prove to be the same people who had murdered Richard.

This was a good idea, Dorothy considered, until she wondered in what direction Percy could explore Soho. Then it occurred to her, by an association of ideas, that Jules came from Soho. He had written from there when Mr Clair had engaged his services as butler. The little man had come cheap, on the plea that he wanted to learn the English language. He assuredly had improved in his Anglo-Saxon during the six months he had been at the Manor, so Dorothy had no need to speak French to him. Sometimes she did, but her knowledge of the

Parisian tongue was not very large, and she preferred to keep to English. However, the main point of her reflections was that Jules came from Soho, and would be likely to know the neighbourhood. In fact, he might possibly know where some Anarchists lived; and since they were all in league with one another—at least, Miss Clair supposed so—in this way might be traced the house, which it would be necessary to find. Dorothy therefore went in search of Jules, and found him laying the table for luncheon. He knew all about the case, as he had read the papers and had been on the spot. Since he was a foreigner, and never took any liberties, however kind she was to him, the girl had no hesitation in explaining what she wanted. With an English servant, she would have been more reticent. In a few minutes Jules learnt that his young mistress wished to know if he was aware of any house in Soho where Anarchists lived.

"No, mademoiselle," said Jules, staring at her in a surprised manner; and he put down his plate-basket. "I know nothing of those wicked people. Why do you ask, please?"

Then Dorothy explained fully, and told Jules how she wanted Mr Hallon to go up and discover the house, if possible, wherein Sir John Newby had been confined. Jules listened in silence, his dark eyes meekly cast on the ground. When he made a proposition she was far from expecting him to make:

"Mademoiselle," he said, with some emotion, "you have been very kind to me, and I will do anything you want. If Mr Hallon goes to Soho, he may get into trouble, for there are many bad people there. Now I am foreign, and would not be suspected as having anything to do with your English police. Permit me, mademoiselle, to offer you my very humble services."

"What do you mean, Jules?" asked Miss Clair, straightforwardly.

"I mean, mademoiselle, that if you will ask monsieur your father to permit me a holiday—say, to-morrow—I can go to Soho, which I know well, and there can learn all you desire to know about the house in which Sir John Newby was shut up."

"How can you do that, Jules?"

"I can go to a restaurant and talk and listen," said the butler. "Oh, yes, mademoiselle, there are many wicked Anarchists there in Soho, and they go to dine at restaurants. I will not be suspected, so I can ask questions, and learn all. Then I shall return to lay my knowledge at the feet of mademoiselle, who has been such an angel to me."

Dorothy was delighted. "Oh, Jules! can you do this for me?"

"Why, certainly, mademoiselle. I would do much more. If you will ask that I procure a holiday—say, to-morrow—and then——"

"Of course—of course!" Dorothy clapped her hands joyfully. "How clever of you, Jules! We shall soon know all about Sir John's imprisonment. Then we may be able to trace the assassin."

She went away very satisfied, and told her father that Jules wanted a holiday. Although the butler was badly paid, and had never been away from the Manor since he had come there, Mr Clair thought that his request was monstrous. He sent for Jules, and questioned him severely as to his reason for wanting to go to Soho. Jules produced the excuse of a father who was ill, and who might be dead before his affectionate son could reach his bedside. Mr Clair was not a bad-hearted man, and easily beguiled, so he graciously gave Jules permission to go up to London, on the understanding that he was to be back in time to wait at dinner. Then Mr Clair waved Jules grandly out of the library, and felt himself quite a benefactor to his fellowman. He might not have been so pleased with himself had he seen the amused smile which curved the butler's lips when out of sight. Jules did not like Mr Clair, and was clever enough to see his many weaknesses.

However, permission had been given, and Jules went up to London by the eight o'clock train. That same day Percy appeared at the Manor, and was formally pardoned by Mr Clair for behaving rudely when he was turned out of the house. Hallon was not aware that he had been rude, and merely smiled in an amused way, as Jules had done. Mr Clair always wanted to impress people with his grand manner and

condescension, but only succeeded in making them laugh. Fortunately, he was blind to his defects in this way, and moved through his small world like an Olympian god amongst inferior mortals.

While he was congratulating himself in the library that he had put Hallon in his place, that eager lover had wandered into the garden with Dorothy. They sought their usual seat, and then the girl described to Percy the circumstances which had led to the removal of the interdiction.

"What!" cried Hallon, greatly astonished. "Do you mean to say that Sir John Newby is married?"

"Yes; but he thought his wife was dead."

"Humph! I'm not so sure that he did. Sir John is too clever a man not to make certain. However, she has bowled him out, and the way is clear for you and me. We can walk to the altar now, Dorothy, without any obstacle intervening."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Dorothy, significantly. "My father still wants you to unravel the mystery of Richard Newby's death."

"But that doesn't trouble him. There is no reason why——"

"He should be suspected," finished Miss Clair, quickly. "No, there is not, since my father knew Richard but slightly. But my father believes that Sir John knows about the murder."

"What! Does he believe him to be guilty?"

"Oh, no. But he thinks that these Anarchists who kidnapped Sir John—I told you about that—may accuse him of guilt, unless the truth is made known."

"Still," argued Percy, perplexed, "I don't see how this affects your father, dearest."

"Well, you see, Sir John has a mortgage on the Manor, and although he is inclined to let it remain for the present, he may change his mind. My father thought that if you learnt the truth, Sir John, out of gratitude from being set free from possible blackmail, might give the mortgage to me when I marry you."

"Ah! but would he," said Hallon, sagely, "seeing that he is a disappointed suitor?"

"Yes," said Dorothy, firmly. "Sir John has accepted the situation." Hallon shrugged his

shoulders. "He can do nothing else, seeing that his wife insists upon coming back to him. Well, if Mr Clair wants to know the truth for this reason, and will not permit our marriage until the mystery is unravelled, I accept the task. But how to begin the search," added Percy, scratching his head, "is more than I can tell. It is like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"You must begin in Soho," said Dorothy, eagerly; and then she explained her plan, and how she had enlisted the services of Jules Schwytz. "So you see, dearest, that when Jules comes back to-night with the information about the house you can go there and make inquiries, and so learn who kidnapped Sir John and killed his brother."

"It is not a bad idea," pondered Hallon "but it will not be very easy to carry out. These Anarchists are very cunning, and they will not admit murder."

"Then you agree with me, dear, that Richard was murdered by these Anarchists?"

"Yes—it looks like it. All the same, Sir John's behaviour is very strange. I expect what Count Bezkoﬀ says is true, and he is implicated in Russian politics in spite of his denials. Well, my darling, all we can do is to wait until Jules' return. Meanwhile, let us dismiss the case, and talk of our future." And this they did for quite two hours, until Lady Panwin summoned them to afternoon tea.

Then an unaccountable thing happened—at least, it was unaccountable in the squire's eyes. Jules never appeared to wait at dinner, and Mr Clair was exceedingly angry at the liberty which the butler had taken. He blamed himself for having been too kind, and prepared a crushing reproof for Jules when he re-appeared. The Swiss, however, never came that night, nor did he turn up the next morning. Even when the dinner hour came round once more he was still missing, so Mr Clair announced his determination to dismiss him when he came back again. "That is," said the indignant squire, "if the scoundrel dares to show his face in my house."

But Jules never came back. Three days elapsed, and still he was absent. Not a letter, or a card, or even a telegram, came to explain why he had taken

—very appropriately—French leave; and great was the sorrow in the Manor kitchen for the loss of the favourite. Dorothy was seriously alarmed, as she thought that the poor little man might have got into trouble with the Anarchists.

"You must not think of going to Sôho," she said to Hallon. "Perhaps Jules has been killed, and these horrid people would kill you."

"I shall certainly go," said Hallon, obstinately. "It would not be right for me to let a little rat like Jules go where I was afraid to go myself. Will your father communicate with the police?"

"No. He simply thinks that Jules has run away."

"Is not his box here?"

"Yes; but there may be nothing of value in it."

"My dear, a man's private possessions, however cheap, are always of value to him. Jules has undoubtedly been killed, or else he has been captured like Sir John. If he is shut up in that room, I must go and look for him."

"But how can you find the house, Percy?"

"I must think about that, my dear."

Dorothy was very fearful lest her lover should get into trouble with the Anarchists—that is, if Anarchists were mixed up in the mysterious business—and did not want him to venture. But Hallon insisted, and left her in tears when he returned to the Minters, wondering how he was to find the house. Then it was that fortune stood his friend.

CHAPTER XXI

WILLY was alone when Hallon came back, and immediately asked if Jules had been heard of. The man had now been absent for four days, and Willy wondered, as every one else did, if he had been murdered by those who were anxious to hide the name of Newby's assassin. Hallon told her that Jules was yet absent, and then mentioned his determination to go to Soho and search. Willy heard him in silence, and did not attempt to dissuade him. Then she looked up.

"If I could help you—"

"But you can't, my dear girl. What do you know about Soho?" said Percy, impatiently.

Willy did not immediately reply. She was wondering if it would be wise for her to relate her adventure with Count Bezloff. She guessed that Percy would scold her, and she did not like to be scolded. Nevertheless, for Dorothy's sake, it would not do for her to allow him to rush blind-folded into danger, as Jules apparently had done.

"If I tell you something," she said, slowly, "you must promise not to be angry."

"No. How could I be angry with you? I have no right to be. What is it?"

Miss Minter wasted no time in fencing, but related the flight and the saving of Count Bezloff. Hallon was, as she expected, very angry, and told her that she had done a rash thing.

"You ought to have given the man in charge. I expect he knows the whole truth."

"He said that he did not," said Willy, defending herself.

"Of course, a scoundrel like that would."

"He is not a scoundrel. He is very good-looking."

Hallon laughed scornfully. "That is so like a woman. All handsome men are angels, and all ugly people devils. Well, and why did you tell me this?"

"I shall explain, if you'll stop scowling at me."

"There"—Hallon smoothed his brow—"after all, it is not my place to correct you. I'll leave that to Billy."

"You mustn't tell Billy," said Miss Minter in alarm.

"Very well, I won't. Go on; what is it?"

Willy handed him Count Bezkoﬀ's card. "You see that the address is in Soho. Now this may be the very house where Sir John was taken to. Go there, and see Count Bezkoﬀ. He may be able to explain what has become of Jules."

"By Jove!" said Hallon, copying down the address on the card, for Willy refused to part with it altogether. "I expect he knows all about the kidnapping and the murder, and the whereabouts of Jules. Perhaps he killed Richard Newby himself."

"You have no right to say that," cried Willy, furiously.

Hallon whistled, as he returned the card, and looked at her curiously. "You don't mean to say that Bezkoﬀ's good looks have——"

"If you don't hold your tongue," interrupted Willy, with flaming cheeks, "I shall never speak to you again." And she dashed out of the room, with a defiant look over her shoulder.

The young man was vexed and uneasy, since he saw that Bezkoﬀ's undeniably good looks had impressed the girl. It was strange, he thought, that so usually sensible a young woman should be caught by outward show. However, she had rendered him an undoubted service, and there would be time enough to talk her out of a possible infatuation when he came back from Soho. Having come to this conclusion, Hallon made his plans for the journey.

- Very wisely, he said nothing to Dorothy about his venture, as he guessed she would only fret did she know that he was walking into possible danger. He therefore made an easy excuse of seeing after some

details of his motor business, and 'next day' caught the late afternoon train.

It was after five o'clock when Hallon found himself in a shabby street in Soho, and at the door of a shabby house. Raffish-looking men and dishevelled women loafed about, laughing and talking, mostly in foreign tongues. The street seemed to be a portion of the Continent, or, rather, resembled the Plains of Shinar, so many were the tongues spoken. Hallon congratulated himself that his revolver was in his hip-pocket, and rather regretted that he had not asked Billy to share the adventure. It would have been one after that young gentleman's own heart. However, here was Hallon on the threshold of the mystery, and he had to go through with the matter.

A slim, olive-complexioned woman, distinctly French, opened the door, and when Percy, in her own tongue, asked for Count Bezkoﬀ, she not only admitted that he resided there, but shewed him into a small, dingy room on the ground floor. When she went upstairs to tell the Russian about his visitor, Hallon glanced round the ill-smelling, ill-looking apartment, and wondered that so clean and smart a man as Bezkoﬀ, and an aristocrat at that, should inhabit so mean a dwelling. But on second thoughts he remembered that perhaps this was only the Count's official Anarchistic address. Then again came the reflection that Bezkoﬀ had given this address to Willy. Yet it seemed incredible that he could expect an English lady to visit him in so disreputable a neighbourhood.

Buried in these thoughts, Hallon stood by the dirty window, looking out on to the dirty, narrow street. Behind him the door was opened, and so quietly that he did not know anyone had entered, until a shawl was thrown over his head. At once the young man gripped his revolver; but before he could draw it many hands grasped him, and immediately afterwards a stunning blow on the head reduced him to unconsciousness. Hallon's last thought, as he fell to the ground, was that a third victim, in the person of himself, had been added to the Anarchistic list.

•CHAPTER XXII

HOBSON, the rural constable, always complained that Beltan seemed to have a magnetic attraction for all sorts and conditions of tramps. He certainly was right in thus speaking, for on occasions unusual numbers of ragged, unkempt figures congregated on the roads between Axleigh and Beltan. Also, at various times, many gipsies, with their caravans and horses and tribes of children, trailed along the high-ways to camp on the common, looking picturesque enough, but decidedly dangerous in their wildness. Why these vagrants, gipsy and Gentile, should thus make Beltan a rendezvous was not clear. The neighbourhood was not wealthy, nor were the villagers generous to the poor. But the army of tramps regularly drifted across the country twice and thrice a year, either making for the north of England or dropping southward to the Channel.

Billy Minter and his sister had their abode on the high road, and, therefore, found their cottage so infested by these undesirable creatures that oftentimes they made up their minds to remove. But the cottage was very pretty and cheap. Willy desired to live near Dorothy, to whom she was greatly attached, and her brother found Beltan to be a convenient distance from London, to which city he went once a week, either on business or pleasure. For these sufficient reasons the two remained where they were, but waged continual warfare with the wastrels who begged. Not that the Minters did not feel for the misery of the poor; but, to tell the truth, this particular class of pauper was not honest. Billy prided himself on his breed of fowls, as much as Willy did on her household linen, and when articles

and birds disappeared on occasions, their owners did not feel very genial towards the next possible depredator who appeared at their back door.

On the day that Percy Hallon went to London, on the quest which had ended so badly for him, Willy, returning from the Manor House at six o'clock, was accosted in the gloaming by a wild looking figure in ragged garments and armed with a formidable cudgel. From his speech—what she could hear of it, for he spoke softly—he seemed to be foreign, but what his nationality might be she could not determine. His greasy hat was pulled well down over his eyes, and only the tip of his nose was visible above a heavy moustache and a grizzled black beard. He held out a hand and mumbled something about starvation. Willy was not hard-hearted, and placed a penny in his hand. As she did so the tramp's fingers closed over her own.

"Let me go! How dare you!" cried Miss Minter, not at all afraid, although the road was deserted. "I'll give you in charge."

"Perhaps it would be safer for me to be in gaol," said the tramp in excellent English, and with a refined accent.

Willy pulled her hand away and stepped back astonished. She knew the voice, yet could not tell who spoke.

"Who are you?"

"Cupid in disguise. Love in a mask," said the tramp, airily.

"Then, with a swift glance around, he pulled off, not only his hat, but his hair and beard and moustache. From ugly he became handsome, from old he became young, from black he became golden.

Willy gasped, "Count Bezko!"

"At your service, now and always," said the Count, gracefully, and carefully replaced his disguise.

"Why are you here?" asked Miss Minter, confused. "Why are you dressed so dreadfully?"

"You are the cause," said Bezko, somewhat sadly.

"I am the cause? What nonsense you talk! Explain."

"Here, in the high road, at this house, in this

"condition of rags and tatters?" said Bezukoff, rapidly. "That would be unpleasant for you, Miss Minter, and dangerous for me."

"Why dangerous for you?"

"There are many eyes on me," said Bezukoff, sinking his voice.

Willy looked round with a nervous air. "You are talking very strangely, Count," she said, wondering what it all meant.

"I can explain my strangeness, if you will take me to your cottage."

"In that dress! What would the servants say?"

"They would applaud your generosity in giving a weary old tramp a piece of bread and a drink of tea on your lawn. Never fear. I have played many a part like this, and no one will guess."

"My brother is at home," said Willy, hesitating.

"I am perfectly ready to reveal myself to your brother."

"That would be dangerous," she said, hurriedly.

"He has not a good opinion of you. Mr Clair——"

"I quite understand," interrupted Bezukoff, quickly.

"Pardon my rudeness, but we cannot talk here. Take me to your lawn, in my character of a tramp. I can explain much to yourself and to your brother. Much," repeated Bezukoff, significantly, "which may help to unravel the mystery of Richard Newby's death."

"But—but—will what you are about to say incriminate you?"

Bezukoff laughed, but his blue eyes filled with a tender light as he glanced furtively at the girl. He quite understood that she was concerned about his safety.

"I am not altogether what I should be, Miss Minter," he said, frankly; "but I think when I explain myself to you and to Mr Minter, that neither of you will have so bad an opinion of me as, say, Mr Clair has."

Willy hesitated no longer. Catching up her skirts, she walked swiftly along the road, and Bezukoff followed at a slow pace. The cottage was only a stone's-throw distant, and Miss Minter, entering the gates, intimated that the so-called tramp should seat

himself on the dry lawn while she went inside for food. Bezkoﬀ therefore dropped wearily on to the burnt turf, as he really was tired, and watched Willy's white dress vanish within doors.

"She is as sweet and fragrant as a flower," the Russian told himself, "and as noble in her looks as a goddess. Strange, that having escaped woman's wiles for so many years, I should fall in love with a country lady. And my love was born of a glance. I think her love has been born also." Well, perhaps, this evening she may shew some sign of interest in me. And then——" He paused and shuddered. "I am taking a perilous path," he concluded, and looked eastward, to where Abbot Hurley's Tower rose blackly against the pale sky.

Shortly Miss Minter emerged with Billy at her heels. Brother and sister walked straight to where Bezkoﬀ lounged on the sward.

"You are Count——" began Billy, brusquely, when the Russian cut him short.

"No names in the open," he said, softly. "The night has a thousand eyes, and ears, too, for all I know."

"What the dickens do you mean?" asked Billy, taken aback.

"I shall tell you, if you will take me into yonder arbour."

"No," said Billy, after a glance at his sister. "Come into the house."

"In this dress?" Bezkoﬀ rose, and looked doubtfully at his rags.

"Pooh!" said the young man. "We are supposed to be eccentric, and entertaining a tramp cannot make our reputation worse. Come along."

Bezkoﬀ obeyed, feeling that Billy was friendly. And, indeed, Mr Minter, who was invariably guided by Willy, had just received a rapid explanation of her adventure with the Russian when he had taken refuge behind the hedge. Billy, being less suspicious than Percy, had not scolded his sister. Of course, he was on his guard, as Mr Clait had reported Bezkoﬀ to be a rascal. All the same, he wished to give him the benefit of the doubt until he explained why he was masquerading as one of the submerged tenth.

Therefore, in a few minutes the trio were seated in Billy's study, with the door and window closed, and the lamp lighted. The first thing Bezkoﬀ did, when free from possible observation, was to remove his disguise; and Billy started when he saw the handsome, refined face of the young man. It did not look like the face of a blackmailer.

"Will you both promise to keep what I am about to tell you secret, until I give you leave to speak?" asked Bezkoﬀ, when seated.

"Why should we?" asked Billy, bluntly.

"Because, if you speak before it is necessary, there will be danger from Anarchists."

"Pooh!" said Billy, coolly. "I don't believe in such cattle."

"Yet I am one," said Bezkoﬀ, smiling oddly.

"So Mr Clair says. He also declared that you tried to blackmail him."

"I did," assented the Russian, wincing.

Billy's young face grew hard. "Then you are a blackguard, after all!"

Bezkoﬀ glanced sideways at Willy's anxious face. "I was. I am not now, Mr Minter. An angel met me and changed my nature. Not that it was ever very bad," added the young man, laughing nervously. "My present position is owing to family misfortunes and to political fanaticism. But I see clearly now, what I never saw before, that my country cannot be saved by bombs."

Billy jumped up. "Good heavens, are you one of those beastly murderers who blow people up?"

Bezkoﬀ choked down a laugh. "No, I have never taken any one's life, Mr Minter, not even that of Richard Newby."

"Yes, yes!" broke in Willy quickly; "that is what you came to explain, Count, is it not?"

"Not precisely, since I do not know who killed Newby."

"Then do you know if Jules Schwytz is alive?" asked Billy.

Bezkoﬀ looked ostentatiously surprised. "Who is he?"

"The butler at the Manor House. He went to Soho to see, on behalf of Miss Clair, if he could find"

the house wherein Sir John Newby was confined. He has disappeared."

"And," added Willy, before the Count could speak, "Mr Hallon, whom you met, has gone to the address you gave me, to see you, and inquire about Jules Schwytz."

"When?" asked Bezkoﬀ, quickly, and changed colour.

"To-day—this afternoon."

Bezkoﬀ bit his lip. "I wish you had not given him that address, Miss Minter. There may be danger."

"Danger?" echoed Billy, angrily. "And you gave my sister that address, so she tells me, that she might see you in London."

"I did not wish her to come to that place," said Bezkoﬀ, hurriedly, "and so you see me here, disguised. I could not come as myself, seeing that Mr Clair has put the police on me. But that house in Soho is dangerous. I trust that Mr Hallon will not get into trouble."

"Can't you save him?" asked Willy, turning white.

"He may not be in danger," said the Count, reassuringly, "and yet he was foolish to go there. My fault, I admit. I should not have given you that address."

"She might have gone there herself," fumed Billy.

"No; I came down to prevent that. But I'll go at once to London, after I have explained myself to you; and if Mr Hallon is in trouble I shall save him even at the cost of my own life."

"Oh!"—Willy started to her feet—"is it as dangerous as that?"

"Yes," said Bezkoﬀ, simply; "that Soho house is full of danger."

"Is it the house wherein Sir John was confined?" asked Billy.

The Russian looked at him doubtfully. "I cannot answer that question as yet, Mr Minter."

"You promised to speak plainly."

"As plainly as I can." But I must consider my own life. Should I reveal too much I may be shot, or stabbed."

"Tell me one thing," said Willy, sitting down again. "Was Richard Newby killed in mistake for Sir John?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Did the Anarchists kill him?"

"I cannot tell you."

"That means you will not?"

"It means that I cannot. I am only a humble member of the society, Miss Minter. The Vowels know the truth. I do not."

"The Vowels?" said Billy, perplexed.

Bezkoﬀ gave the same explanation to him as he had given to Sir John Newby on the Manor lawn and then continued: "I wish to tell you both how I came to be connected with such a society. The history will not take me long."

"Go on," said Willy, looking at him intently.

"To be brief," said Bezkoﬀ, "I was born at Moscow, and my parents were wealthy and noble. Owing to the jealousy of a high official, my father was accused of conspiracy, and was exiled to Siberia. He escaped, and returned. The police came after him, and he was captured in my mother's boudoir. In trying to defend him she was shot."

"Oh!" said Willy, in horror.

"Yes," said the Russian, and rose, his blue eyes blazing with swift anger, and looking like two sapphires, "you happy English people cannot understand what we suffer from a corrupt Government. My father returned to Siberia and died there in misery; my mother, as I say, was shot. My only sister and myself were turned out to starve in the streets, and our wealth was seized by the high official who had caused all the trouble; and then Anna disappeared."

"Your sister!" said Billy. "What became of her?"

Bezkoﬀ made a gesture of despair. "Do not ask me. All I can say is that, when I was starving in St. Petersburg, her body was dragged from the Neva. Oh!"—he clenched his hands as Willy uttered a pitying exclamation—"can you wonder that I hate the rotten government which has ruined my family without cause? I joined a new society that had been

formed, which was to work^d in England; its aim was to try and accumulate money to assist the down-trodden millions of my country in one gigantic effort to upset the present wicked men who are in power. You know what they are—you have read the horrors of the war—of Red Sunday—of the prisons—of—but why go on? You cannot understand—things with us are too terrible.”

There was a sympathetic silence. Then Billy spoke: “And this society?”

“It is called the Vowel Society, as I have explained,” said Bezkoﬀ, rapidly. “I got money from my uncle, who, in fact, allows me an income, not knowing that I am a member of the society. But I have joined it in the hope of aiding my country. Should I leave it? I would be killed.”

“Do you want to leave it?” said Willy, abruptly.

“Yes,” said Bezkoﬀ, and brought his hand heavily on the table. “As soon as I can I hope to leave it, but I do so at the cost of my immediate death, unless——”

“Unless what?” asked Billy, deeply interested.

Bezkoﬀ started and passed his hand across his forehead. “Don’t ask me that—yet,” he said, significantly; “but I found the society was as corrupt as the Government it fought against. I see now, what I did not see when I joined, that violence will not save Russia. I do not care to be forced to blackmail English gentlemen—to insult English ladies. At the dagger’s point I have been forced to do things against which my soul revolts. Mr Clair did well to scorn me. Since we had—as we thought—lost Sir John, and his millions, I was sent to extort money from Mr Clair. You know how he defied me; how I was turned from his house in disgrace—I—a Russian noble. But I shall be free some day. How, I know not.”

“How many members are there of this society?” asked Billy, bluntly.

“Only thirty, who are controlled by five more—A, E, I, O, and U, as I told you—thirty-five members in all. The aim is to get money in any way, honestly or dishonestly, as occasion serves. We tried to inveigle Sir John Newby into our nets. I was chosen to do so, and therefore I came to know him.

But he was too clever, and would not do business with us. But Richard——”

“Richard Newby was mixed up in these matters, you mean?”

“I think so—I am almost sure,” said Bezkoﬀ, vehemently. “There was, I fancy, some idea of trading on the resemblance between the rich brother and the poor one. But I cannot be certain. I failed with Sir John, and Richard was taken charge of by another member of our society. It was E who sent him to St Petersburg—but he did not go, for some reason. He came down here, and here was killed.”

“But who by?—who by?” demanded Billy, insistently.

“I cannot say. Perhaps by the member who was sent to spy on him. I was told to go to the Manor and state that Mr Clair had struck the blow, since Mr Clair had been seen by our spy near the Cuckoo’s Grove. But I swear,” said Bezkoﬀ, earnestly, “that I am as ignorant of the real truth as you are. I tell you these things, because you, Miss Minter, have done me a service, and I wish both you and your brother to think well of me. Jules Schwytz may have been captured when he was spying. Mr Hallon may be detained also. If this is so, these things point to the fact that the Anarchists have to do with the murder of Richard, who was certainly involved in their scheme.”

“But,” broke in Billy, quickly, “you are a member of the society, so you ought to know everything.”

“Only the Five know everything,” said Bezkoﬀ, decisively. “I am a very humble member of the society. However, I shall go back to Soho and learn what I can; but let me impress upon you the necessity of leaving matters in my hands. Should you call in the aid of the police, Mr Hallon and Jules may be killed.”

“Oh, poor Dorothy!” cried Willy, rising, and very pale. “You must save Mr Hallon—you must save him!”

“I swear that I will if he is in danger,” said the Russian, impressively, and catching her hand; “for your sake, Miss Minter, I shall save him, even at the cost of my own life.”

Willy withdrew her hand. "No—no! I do not wish that," she said, reluctantly.

"Let us inform the police!" observed Billy, greatly excited.

"You have forgotten my warning, Mr Minter. Say nothing to the police, at all events for the present. If you do, Hallon will be smuggled out of the way, and in some manner put to death. It is all my fault," groaned the young man. "I should not have given you that address, Miss Minter; but in the excitement of the moment I never reflected of the danger of doing so. It struck me afterwards, and so I came in disguise, as I said, to stop you from going to Soho. But I never dreamt that you would send any one else to the house."

"Then what is to be done?" asked Willy, anxiously.

Bezkoft, who had assumed his disguise again, turned quickly. "I have told you, Miss Minter, I'll go up and see what I can do." He moved towards the door. "As soon as I can, I shall write—only give me a week, to do what I can. Only one thing remains to be said. Should you hear nothing of me or Hallon or Jules within a week, search the vault."

Billy rose, quite amazed. "Search the vault!" he echoed. "Do you mean Abbot Hurley's crypt?"

"The same!" Bezkoft opened the door. "The whole secret of these troubles, and, I truly believe, of the murder itself, is to be found in the vault. Wait for a week, and then search. Good-bye!" And with one last glance at Willy, and a nod to her brother, the Russian passed out of the room and house and grounds, so rapidly that he was gone almost before they could realise his absence.

When alone, brother and sister, deeply agitated, looked at one another. "How infernally muddled everything is!" said Billy, in a disconsolate tone. "What is to be done?"

"We must obey the Court, and wait for a week," said Willy, firmly. "If we do not—"

"What then?"

"You heard what he said. Percy will be murdered!"

CHAPTER XXIII

WILLY MINTER was a healthy girl, with great control over her emotions. But the next morning she was unable to get up, and so passed a few hours in bed. The statements of Bezkoﬀ were so novel to one who led so quiet a life as she did, that she could not realise how serious the position of Hallon might be. But when he did not return the same night, she began to believe that he had indeed met with foul play in the house alluded to. Billy, not finding her at the breakfast-table, came in and discussed the situation. In the zeal of his friendship he was about to start off for Axleigh in the car and communicate with Inspector Trusk. Willy, however, reminded him again of Bezkoﬀ's warning of the danger to Hallon should the police interfere, and expressed her firm conviction that, since the Russian had gone back to Soho, any danger which Percy might be in would be considerably neutralised by his presence. After some argument, Billy saw the common sense of this, and they mutually agreed to trust in the Russian. Considering the circumstances, they could do nothing else. So all that remained was to wait until Bezkoﬀ wrote, telling what had happened, or to expect, in the face of what they had surmised, the return of Percy himself.

Since Willy was, therefore, in bed, with more or less shattered nerves, she was not able to go to the Manor House, as usual, to see Dorothy. And she did not wish to go, since she had promised Bezkoﬀ, along with Billy, to hold her tongue, and Dorothy would be certain to ask questions difficult to answer about Percy's absence. It thus happened that Dorothy put into execution a plan which she had conceived a few

days before, when Percy talked of going to the Soho house. Miss Clair was, of course, quite ignorant that Hallon had gone, since he had made an excuse, and merely thought that his motor business was detaining him longer in town than he expected. She wished to go to Kensington and see Sir John Newby, and learn by persistent questioning if he really could not remember the number and street of the house in which Jules was possibly incarcerated. Then, as Dorothy thought, she would be able to tell Percy when he came back that she had found the house, and that all he had to do was to inform the police, who would at once raid the place to find the missing butler. There would be no need then—so Dorothy considered—for Hallon to risk his life in so undesirable a neighbourhood. It was in Dorothy's mind to tell Willy of her plan, but as Miss Minter did not make her appearance, and the girl was pressed for time, she went off to Belton Station without troubling to explain. By half-past ten o'clock Dorothy was in the train on her way to Fenchurch-street, and very anxious to reach the end of her journey.

Lady Panwin had readily given her niece permission to call on Sir John, as she wished Dorothy to invite Mrs Broll and her companion, Julia Flint, to the Manor. The fact is that Lady Panwin, being bitten by the detective fever, wished to make a few inquiries about Richard Newby's past life on her own account, and learn, if possible, if there was anything therein which would point out the motive for the assassination, as well as the name of the assassin. Mrs Broll, who had nursed the millionaire and his brother, would, Lady Panwin thought, be the person most likely to supply the information, and she directed Dorothy to get her to come down to Belton for a few days. Once Mrs Broll was at the Manor, Lady Panwin was very certain that she would be able to screw all needful information out of her. Therefore, Miss Clair went to town, as has been stated.

Dorothy had been somewhat surprised that her grim aunt had allowed her to go alone to London, and to the house of one who had, on the face of it, behaved so badly as the secretly married Sir John. But when she reached Fenchurch-street Station, she

learnt that Lady Panwin was not quite so confiding as she had thought. In other words, Dorothy passed the barrier to find Lady Panwin at her heels, and was first made aware of her presence by feeling her aunt's arm slipped within her own. Seeing that she had left the old dame at the Manor, it was something of a shock to behold her in London, and Dorothy gasped:

"Aunt! Aunt!"

"Flesh and blood, my dear," said Lady Panwin, coolly. "After you left I thought it was scarcely right for you to go alone to Camden Hill, and be in the company of Lady Newby, as I am sure such a fool would insult you. I therefore dressed in five minutes, and reached the station immediately before the train left. You were in a carriage, I expect, and did not see me arrive. It's lucky that you did not," added Lady Panwin, arranging her mantle, grimly. "I must have been a sight, as, to tell the truth, my dear, I ran nearly all the way to the station. Foolish work for a woman of my years."

Dorothy could not help laughing. The idea of stately Lady Panwin, the widow of a Peer, rushing along in the hot sunshine and amidst clouds of dust, made her almost hysterical. The old dame laughed herself, but rebuked her niece by patting her on the cheek.

"You have no reverence for old age, my dear," she said, good-humouredly. "Come along down to the Mark-lane Station. We'll reach Kensington High Street by the underground railway, which is cheap if stuffy."

"You seem to know London well, aunt."

"Any one who is a pauper knows London well," said Lady Panwin, not at all ruffled. "As the wife of Panwin I should have been left a good income, and then I would have been as ignorant as most people are of things every one with sense ought to know. But the present Lord Panwin is a skinflint, and I had no proper marriage settlement, so here I am, a pauper."

"You ought to marry again, auntie," said Dorothy, when they were on their way, underground to Kensington.

Lady Panwin laughed. "I'm a pretty figure of a

woman to marry again, my dear. Tall, gaunt, black as a gipsy, and with the temper of Old Nick. Who would take me to the altar?"

"Aunt! Aunt! You misjudge yourself. You are not stout, which is all the better at your age. You have a fine skin and wonderful dark eyes, and good teeth, and when you pay attention to dress—which you do not, as you know, dear—you are as handsome a woman of your age as one can see. Then your manner—when you like—is perfect."

"And very bad when I don't like," said Lady Panwiz, in high good humour. "Dorothy, you are an arrant flatterer. I used to be handsome before keeping Francis's house wore me to the skin and bone you see before you. Besides, I don't want to marry again. Men are such fools. Sir John Newby—as he was," said Lady Panwin, with emphasis, "is the sole sensible man I have met, and even *he* wanted to marry a pink and white chit like you, Dorothy. Heigh, ho! the man's married, however, so he is neither your money nor mine. And I have talked more rubbish, my dear," ended Lady Panwin, emphatically, "in the last ten minutes than I have done for years."

Dorothy was truly surprised at the gaiety of her aunt, whom she had invariably regarded, and with good reason, as a somewhat saturnine person. But Lady Panwin, smiling and laughing, looked much younger, and became more gracious in her manner. But why she should behave so amiably during this somewhat dull journey puzzled Dorothy.

"You are in very good spirits, auntie," she ventured to say, as they alighted at Kensington High-street. "May I ask why?"

"You may ask," was the somewhat tart answer; "but I am not sure that you will learn much from my answer."

"I should like to hear it."

"Well, then, I have been thinking over the case, and I fancy I have hit upon a solution of the mystery."

"What is it?" asked Dorothy, much excited.

"I can't tell you now, for I can't be sure that I am right until I question Mrs Broll."

And then Lady Panwin shut her mouth, and nothing would induce her to open it again.

On making inquiries at the door, Sir John Newby proyed to be out. When Lady Newby was asked for the footman stared, and said that his master was not married. Lady Panwin, therefore, sent the servant for Mrs Broll, and when she was safe in the drawing-room with Dorothy, made a mystic remark.

"As I thought," said she, with calm satisfaction. "Sir John did not bring his wife here; therefore, as yet, has not acknowledged his marriage to the world."

"But you expected to find Lady Newby in possession, auntie, since you hinted that she would insult me."

"Quite so, my dear. As I said, I can be certain of nothing until I have seen Mrs Broll."

"I am sure, auntie, I don't know what you mean."

"You will know soon, if I am right in my surmise. If I am not, I'll hold my tongue about my present thoughts."

Dorothy gazed somewhat helplessly at the grim face, which had by this time lost its momentary youthfulness. Yet she attempted again to question her aunt, when the footman reappeared, with a request that the ladies would be graciously pleased to honour Mrs Broll with an interview in her own room. Miss Clair quite expected to see her fiery-tempered relative fly into a passion at the liberty taken by the housekeeper. But, strange to say, Lady Panwin seemed to be rather pleased than otherwise. She mystified Dorothy more than ever by the alacrity with which she followed the servant into Mrs Broll's private sanctum.

This was a room of no great size, at the back of the mansion, decorated much in the same gaudy fashion which characterised Mrs Broll's dress. The walls were yellow, the carpet was green, and the hangings displayed a brilliant peacock blue. The furniture was upholstered in vivid scarlet, softened by many antimacassars, worked by the nimble fingers of Mrs Broll. Portraits of the Newby twins also appeared on the walls, with many photographs of them at various stages of their existence. Also,

there were wax flowers, woollen mats, dyed grasses, dozens of ornaments, cheap and expensive, and one huge family Bible placed in the very centre of the round table, which wobbled in the middle of the room. The whole apartment was so crowded with heterogeneous furniture, and contained such an ill-blended mass of colours, that Dorothy involuntarily closed her eyes when she entered. She opened them again when Mrs Broll's shrill voice was heard.

"Such an honour!" said Mrs Broll, throwing up her hands and looking more like a gaily-plumaged parrot than ever. "Please be seated, your ladyship." She drew forward a slippery horsehair seat. "Miss Clair, will you recline on the sofa? Me and Julia, my lady, have been making records for the poor slum people. We do it to tickle their intellects, my lady."

Then the visitors became aware that Julia Flint, looking more handsome and morose than ever, was seated in a kind of alcove veiled by lace curtains, and before a small table, upon which stood a large gramophone. It was still in motion, and during a moment of silence Lady Pauwin heard the grinding of the machine.

"What do you mean by making records, Mrs Broll?" she asked, curiously.

The housekeeper began to explain, with great volubility. "This," she said, pointing to the bell-shaped receiver of the machine, and speaking as though to an infant school, "is a gramophone. Me and Julia here place on this part a virgin disc—that is, one on which there are no marks. Then Julia sets the machinery going, and I recite a little poem, or say a few helpful words, and even sing little songs. All that I say is taken down by the machine, and when me and Julia here visit our slum, we turn on the machine again, so that it can comfort the poor people with sunshine."

Lady Panwin nodded and laughed. "Very clever of you, I am sure," she remarked, good-humouredly. "But you can buy records in the shops."

"Foolish frivolous records, your ladyship," said Mrs Broll, drawing up her spare little figure—"music-hall songs, and crazy music, and vulgar jokes. These things, my lady, will not help the poor.

No. I buy clean discs, and cover them myself with moral poetry. The machine is working, your ladyship, and all the time you and me have been talking our words have been taken down."

"I thought you had to speak right into the mouth of the bell," said Dorothy, curiously.

"It sounds better," admitted Mrs Broll—"better and clearer. But the room is small, and our voices are not very soft; therefore, everything we say must be recorded on that humble disc. Ah!" said Mrs Broll, improving the situation, "how like the angel who writes in the Book of Life. Our most careless utterance is noted, and—"

Lady Panwin cut short these moral reflections "The machine, as you say, is taking down what we are talking about. Say one of your verses, Mrs Broll, and let us hear it repeated."

Without a moment's hesitation, Mrs Broll advanced to the brass receiver of the gramophone, and shouted four lines:

The world is very bright,
And I am free from pain;
Then let me behave aright,
And never, never complain.

Mrs Broll's metre and sentiments were both so weak that Dorothy had to laugh. As she did so, she became aware that Julia Flint was watching her in anything but an amiable manner. The deaf girl frowned when Miss Clair laughed, since she could see plainly the expression of her face, although she could not hear the sound of her merriment. Mrs Broll took no notice, but burst out fervently again:

And when I wash the floor,
My husband earns his fee;
When he knocks at the door,
I'll let him in to tea.

"A simple song," broke off Mrs Broll, simpering, "of my own composition, to instil a spirit of meekness into the minds of working women. Now we'll have it all over again." Then, while Dorothy tried to curb her laughter under Miss Flint's angry stare, Mrs Broll readjusted the machine and set it going again.

"Extraordinary!" said Lady Panwin.

It certainly was. Both she and Dorothy could hear plainly what Mrs Broll had said to the footman when he announced their arrival, and then heard all the conversation which had taken place since they had entered the room. The words were a trifle faint, but perfectly clear. When, however, the machine came to the eight lines of verse, these were shouted out loudly, since Mrs Broll had been speaking close to the mouth of the receiver. And the performance ended with Mrs Broll's remark on her poetry.

"Extraordinary!" said Lady Panwin again. "And now, Mrs Broll, as I do not want what I have to say to you taken down, perhaps you will stop the gramophone and listen."

Mrs Broll did as she was asked. "But it is quite safe, your ladyship," she said, nodding. "If any words which I don't wish to be heard are taken down by accident, Julia always puts the disc in the fire. We are so used to the sound of the machine—I am, that is, and any one who habitually visits me, like Sir John and"—her face fell, and she sighed—"his brother—that we never notice whether it is going or not. Still, I have had to destroy several discs."

"What about the girl?" asked Lady Panwin.

"She hears nothing, your ladyship, being as deaf as a post. I am not at all pleased with Julia," said Mrs Broll, with a severe look at the silent Miss Flint. "I have discovered that she nourishes a passion for Sir John, which is most indecent in one of her station."

"Do you mean to say that she is in love with him?" asked Dorothy.

"Yes," said Mrs Broll, in great disgust. "I found letters written to him in her bedroom, which, fortunately, she never put in his hands. I expect he would have turned her out had he read them. Yes, Julia"—and then Mrs Broll, with inconceivable cruelty, rapidly informed the deaf girl, with dexterous manipulation of her hands, that she had been talking to the visitors about the letters.

"Shame!" cried Julia, a vivid flush of colour flooding her cheeks; and her voice, as is the case with deaf people, sounded toneless and flat.

"Oh, shame!" And the next instant she had rushed out of the room.

"A shameless girl—a dangerous girl," said Mrs Broll, primly.

"You needn't have told her what you said," remarked Dorothy, hotly.

"That is none of our business," said Lady Panwin, hastily, when she saw the housekeeper's eyes grow as hard as jade at the reproof. It was her desire to keep Mrs Broll in a good temper.

"Young people have young ideas," said Mrs Broll, pityingly. "What is it you wish to ask me, my lady?"

"Have you seen Lady Newby?" asked the other woman, abruptly.

Mrs Broll's sharp eyes looked startled. "There is no Lady Newby!"

"You are quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure, my lady."

"Ah!" Lady Panwin's tone expressed great satisfaction. "I was certain that there was a mistake. Sir John, however, acknowledged as his wife a certain Miss Amy Sanding, and——"

The housekeeper turned as white as death. "Yes, yes," she said. "Of course, I remember now. She is Lady Newby!"

"How clever of you to remember," said Lady Panwin sarcastically. "By the way, Mrs Broll, I believe Richard was always your favourite?"

"Yes," choked the ex-nurse, "he was."

"You mean that he is?"

"Aunt!" cried Dorothy. "What do you mean?"

Lady Panwin took no notice, but stood over Mrs Broll like an elephant over an insect. "Confess! You know what I mean, if my niece does not!" she said, in hard tones. "Confess!"

"No," said Mrs Broll, almost inaudibly. "I do not understand."

"You do. Sir John is dead! Richard is alive!"

Mrs Broll sprang up like a tigress. "Yes," she said, shrilly, "you have guessed the truth. The man you think is Sir John is Richard."

"I knew it!" said Lady Panwin, triumphantly. "I was sure of it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

DOROTHY rose from the sofa, with a quick little gasp, not being able to grasp the situation. Also, she could not understand how her aunt had arrived at the conclusion—vouched for by Mrs Broll—that Richard Newby was masquerading as his brother.

"I think you are both quite mad!" gasped Miss Clair.

"Mad!" said Lady Panwin, fiercely. "You know quite well that there is no madness in our family. Mr Hallon surely disabused you of that idea. I came up here to learn if Sir John—the pretended Sir, John—were really Richard in disguise, and now I know that my supposition is correct."

"How did you guess?" asked Mrs Broll, in a frightened voice. She seemed to be sorry that she had been so frank.

"I noticed the difference in the pretended Sir John when he came down. He was not nearly so nice."

"Not always," said Dorothy, quickly; "but at times he was quite his old self, you know."

"Yes. He tried to act like his dead brother; but when his real self came out—the self of Richard Newby,—he was nervous and disagreeable, and quite at a loss how to act in emergencies. John—as I knew—was always a strong man, whom nothing daunted. That was how he made his fortune. The twins were the same to look at—but, oh, the difference in their character!"

"Yes," said Mrs Broll, in a very small voice; "but you must remember, my lady, that Sir John experienced a great shock. That in itself, my lady, was sufficient to make him nervous."

"Don't call him Sir John," snapped Lady Panwin,

- taking her seat again on the horsehair chair, like a queen about to do justice. "You know that the man is an impostor. Sir John he calls himself, trading on his outward resemblance to his brother. But Richard is his name, and he has all that scamp's shifty, cowardly, disgusting nature."

Mrs Broll fired up. "Don't call him names, if you please. Richard was always my favourite."

"I know that, because you also are shifty and unreliable, Martha Broll. Don't answer me back," cried Lady Panwin, imperiously. Then, having silenced the ex-nurse, she turned to her niece: "Dorothy, you believe me now?"

- "I fancy I do," murmured the girl, recollecting the new and unpleasing traits which had been revealed of late in the presumed Sir John's character, "but I cannot think how you guessed the truth, since father, who knew Sir John as well as you did, never suspected."

"Your father is blind, child. And I must say that I was not quite sure until that woman came to claim him as her husband. I have known both the Newbys for years and years, as intimately as I know Martha here."

"You were always hard on me, my lady," whimpered Mrs Broll, whose airs and graces had gone by the board; "as hard as Sir John ever was. Why, if he had lived, he intended to pension me off."

"And a very good thing too, Martha. You should be grateful."

- "What!" shrieked Mrs Broll, a red spot appearing on each withered cheek. "Do you think it right that I, who nursed Sir John, should be sent into the country to live in a cottage on one hundred pounds a year? What of my poor people in the slums, and my love for a gay life, and my position in the world?"

"At your years," said Lady Panwin, surveying Mrs Broll unsympathetically through her lorgnette, "you ought to be seated in a chimney corner, reading your Bible."

- "Oh, ought I?" screeched Mrs Broll, touched on a raw spot, and highly indignant. "Why, I can walk miles yet. I have all my senses and many of

my teeth. I can read print without glasses, which you use," she snarled, spitefully—"which you use, my lady. Years? What are years, when the heart is young?"

"That is quite enough," said Lady Panwin, cutting short Mrs Broll's angry voice. "Dorothy, as I remarked some time ago, I knew the Newbys for years. I was well aware that Sir John was not married; and even if he had contracted a secret marriage—which was not his way—I should have known. Therefore, when he so readily admitted that actress to be his wife, and made no attempt to brave it out, I guessed in a flash that here was Richard masquerading as John. To marry an actress, and secretly, would be exactly what Richard, the sneak, would do."

"But, auntie, Miss Sanding called her husband John."

"Then she is in the conspiracy along with Martha, here, or else she believes that John is her husband. Richard may have taken his brother's name for marriage, in the same way as he has unlawfully seized it to gain possession of the money."

Mrs Broll, who had been silent through sheer rage at this last attack on her character, now began to defend herself. "There's no conspiracy that I know of," she declared. "If Richard chooses to call himself John that is his own business. After all, the money should come to Richard, in spite of what the will says."

"No!" said Lady Panwin sternly. "Richard will only make ducks and drakes of the money. John knew that, and therefore cut Richard out of his will. And don't forget, Martha, that Richard forged John's name to several cheques. Humph!" the old dame reflected. "I see now that with Richard's skill in forgery, and with his knowledge of John's business as secretary, he will be quite able to handle City affairs under his dead brother's name; and then the resemblance would deceive any one, save me and Martha here."

"You seem to be very certain, my lady," sneered Mrs Broll, with a curious gleam in her eyes; "but you can prove nothing."

"I can, and so can you. We both can prove that the pretended Sir John Newby is really Richard."

"And do you think," cried the housekeeper, furiously, "that I will ruin the babe I nursed on these knees—the boy that I loved the best—the man who has always been good to me?"

"Good to you!" echoed Lady Panwin, with scorn. "Richard Newby was never good to any one but himself. Sir John was good to you—far too good, Martha—and you repay him by allowing this scamp to stand in his shoes."

"You can prove nothing without me," said Mrs Broll, folding her hands on her apron, "and I'll say nothing. You took me unawares, my lady, else you would never have learnt the truth."

"Then you admit that it is the truth?" asked Dorothy, anxiously.

"To you—to my lady here—but to no one else will I open my mouth, if I die for it," snapped the housekeeper, doggedly. "Richard shall have the title and the money."

"We'll see about that," cried Lady Panwin, in great wrath at her authority being thus defied. "Miss Sanding will be made to prove that her husband is an impostor, and I can make you speak, Martha."

"Oh, indeed, my lady!" mocked the other woman. "And how?"

"By telling the police, and having Richard arrested for the murder of his brother."

Again Mrs Broll looked curiously at her visitor, but replied with great quietness. "You will find it difficult to bring home the murder to him, my lady."

"No; I do not think so. Look at the circumstances. Richard intercepted that anonymous letter and kept the appointment made therein, disguised, as much as possible, like his brother. Sir John followed him when you explained about the letter. And you did that, Martha, because you wanted John to save Richard from this unknown rascality which the letter hinted at. John went down, and Richard killed him. Then these Anarchistic people kidnapped Richard, knowing that he had slain his brother like another Cain, and held him in bondage until he consented to play the part of John, and give them

whatever money they wanted. The whole thing is plain to me."

"Oh, indeed, my lady! And how did Richard kill John?"

"With the red-banded knife, which was in John's library. Richard, no doubt, took that knife down with him."

"Why should he when he did not know that John was coming?" argued Mrs Broll, very cleverly.

Lady Panwin whiffed aside the objection calmly. "I believe that Richard took the knife to kill the person who wrote the letter, and thus silence him altogether, lest he should again communicate with John. Also, it might have been in his mind to lay the blame of the murder on John, because of the knife, which was in John's possession; then John appeared unexpectedly and Richard killed him."

"And the motive, my lady?" sneered Mrs Broll, with twinkling eyes.

"Richard will explain that in the dock," said Lady Panwin, rising. "It may have been on account of the forged cheques, or it might have struck Richard that he could masquerade as his brother and handle the money. I can't say. But I am sure, on the grounds I have stated, that Richard is the criminal, and that the Anarchists have made capital out of their knowledge of the crime. What do you think, Dorothy?"

"What you say, auntie, seems very possible, but, after all, it is merely a theory," said the girl, with due caution.

"Theory or not," said the old dame, quietly, "Richard will have to explain how he comes to be masquerading as his brother."

"He will deny everything."

"Not in the face of his identification by me, by Martha here, and by Mrs Newby, or Miss Sanding, if you choose to call her so."

"I shan't say a word!" cried the housekeeper, resolutely.

"Yes you will. And, what is more, Martha, you and Julia Flint will come down this very day to the Manor. There you shall stop under my own eyes until this mystery is cleared up."

"I shall not. John will be annoyed if I go away."

"Call the man Richard, I tell you; and if matters very little if he is annoyed. His shrift will be a short one. If you don't get ready and come down with me this very moment, Martha, I'll go straight to Scotland-yard on my own responsibility. And remember, Martha," added Lady Panwin, with emphasis, "since you must have received a confession from Richard that he killed his brother you will be placed in the dock along with him, if arrested, as an accomplice before the fact."

Mrs Broll turned white and looked afraid. She had not reckoned on this. "You are very hard on Richard, my lady," she moaned.

"Because I want to avenge John's death. Remember, Martha, that John would have married me at one time, and——"

"Auntie!"

"Yes, Dorothy, it is true, strange as it may seem to you. I have laughed at Sir John, and have, perhaps, spoken to sharply of his common ways. All the same, he was a man I respected, although I could never bring myself to become his wife. When he failed with me he turned to you, so now you know the whole truth, my dear. Well, Martha?"

"I'll come, my lady," said Mrs Broll, putting a corner of her black silk apron into her eye. "if you will promise to leave Richard alone for one week."

"So that he may escape, I suppose," said Lady Panwin, coolly; "but he won't, you may be certain of that. The Anarchists have got hold of him, and if he surrenders the identity of Sir John, and thus loses the money, they will kill him. If he doesn't remain to be hanged he will certainly go away to be shot, or stabbed, or blown up."

"But you'll say nothing to the police for one week, my lady?" urged the housekeeper, desperately.

"No, I won't. You have my promise."

Mrs Broll made for the door with great alacrity. "Then I'll pack up and go. Julia will help me, and pack up also."

"Mind," said Lady Panwin, warningly, "you must leave a note behind for Richard, saying that you

have gone with me to the Manor for a rest. He may suspect that I have found him out if you don't lull his suspicions."

"I'll do that, my lady—but he will be very angry at my deserting him in his hour of need."

"Nonsense! You are a privileged person, Martha, and when he comes down he will accept any explanation you like to give."

"When he comes down?" Mrs Broll wheeled rapidly, and looked scared.

"Yes. I want Richard to come down in his character of John. You will lure him to the Manor, as he will be afraid lest you should give him away. I want you and Richard under my own eye, Martha. Go away and pack, or I may change my mind about holding my tongue."

"Yes, my lady, yes." And Mrs Broll, quite subdued, tottered away, trembling like a leaf. She was a bully in her own way, and led the miserable Julia and the servants the life of a dog. But Lady Panwin was too strong for her, and the housekeeper shrewdly suspected that it was now her turn to be bullied and crushed.

When the door closed on the conquered woman, Dorothy looked at her aunt in admiration. "How clever you are," she said. "When we return to-night I shall ask Percy up, and we can discuss how we can find the Soho house."

"What's that?" demanded Lady Panwin, sharply.

Dorothy explained at length. "And I don't want Percy to go into that neighbourhood, in case he should disappear like Jules."

"I quite agree with you, my dear. But when Richard comes down it may not be necessary to trace the house. He will have to explain everything and give the number of the house."

"He doesn't know it."

"Yes he does," said Lady Panwin, serenely. "His escape in a hurry is mere fiction. These Anarchists know who he is, and arranged the whole business of the kidnapping. However, we'll learn the truth soon."

Dorothy hoped fervently that the truth would come to light, and went back to Beltan with her aunt and

Mrs Broll and Julia very well satisfied with the result of her excursion to London. Then came a blow from an unexpected quarter. Percy had disappeared, as Jules had done. She learnt this from Billy Minter, and quite by accident. .

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN Billy Minter returned home with the information that he had been to the Manor House, his sister guessed at once from the downcast expression of his face what had taken place.

"You have told Dorothy that Percy is in danger?" she said.

"Yes," admitted Billy, looking sheepish. "She asked so many questions that I couldn't put her off. I didn't tell her directly," added Billy, seeing how annoyed his sister looked. "I let the information slip by accident."

"You might have guessed that she would ask questions," said Willy, bitterly. "For that reason I stopped in bed this morning. However, the mischief is now done, so I may as well go up and see her."

"Why?" asked Billy, glancing at the clock, which just then struck nine, and then at his sister, who was hastily putting on her cloak. "She doesn't know so very much. I didn't tell her about Bezkoﬀ, but only said that Percy had really gone to Soho instead of his motor factory, and had not turned up as yet."

"That is quite sufficient to make her anxious," said Willy, angrily. "You ought to have had more sense than to go near the house. You never can hold your tongue, Billy. I'll have to tell Dorothy everything now."

"About Bezkoﬀ?"

"Yes. If I don't she will tell her father, who will communicate with the police, and then Percy will be in danger, if what the Count says is true. These Anarchists will not stick at a trifle to save themselves from being found out."

"But Bezkoﬀ will not like our telling," urged Billy again.

"I can't help that. I must break my promise. I don't want Percy to be killed. And then again," added Willy, pausing at the door, "if the police raid the Soho house the Count may be accused of betraying the number—as he has done—and be killed also. I must stop Dorothy from making things public. Did you give her the number of the house?"

"No!" snapped Billy, testily, for he saw that he had been rash.

Willy said no more, since it was idle to scold her brother now that the mischief was done. She walked swiftly to the Manor, and found Dorothy and Lady Panwin in the drawing-room. Mr Clair had gone to the library to write to—as he thought—Sir John Newby. The arrival of Mrs Broll and Julia had annoyed the squire, since his sister would not explain why she had brought them down, and would not allow them to go away again. Mr Clair, therefore, was asking the millionaire to come down and exert his authority in recalling the housekeeper and her white slave. And this—namely, the inveigling of Sir John to the Manor—was exactly what Lady Panwin desired. Until she could see Richard himself, and in Mr Clair's presence, she did not wish to let the squire know the terrible truth which she had discovered.

Dorothy was in tears, when she considered that Percy had gone to Soho, and had not come back. Her one idea was to communicate with Inspector Trusk, of Axleigh, and insist upon the house being discovered. Lady Panwin also favoured this idea, and the two were concocting a letter, which would have gone by the morning's post, but for the opportune arrival of Willy, on fire to prevent the calamity.

"Don't send it," she said, the moment she entered, and on seeing a sheet of paper and a pencil in Dorothy's hand.

"Send what?" asked the girl, astonished.

"The letter to the police. I know you are making a copy of one. If you send it, Percy will be killed."

Dorothy uttered a scream and jumped up, crushing her pencilled copy in her hand.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Is that true?"

"Explain yourself, Willy," said Lady Panwin, sternly.

Miss Minter did, and at full length, commencing from the moment that Bezkoﬀ had taken refuge behind the fence, to the time when he had departed after the second interview, disguised as a tramp.

"I can trust Count Bezkoﬀ," said Willy, breathlessly. "For my sake he will do all he can to save Percy. But if you tell the police, Heaven only knows what may happen."

There was silence for a few minutes. Dorothy cried afresh at the thought of her lover's danger, while Lady Panwin knitted her formidable brows and looked like Minerva at bay. It was the oldest woman of the trio who spoke first.

"You should have told us this before," she said, sharply.

"How could I?" snapped Willy, whose temper was sorely tried. "Billy tells me that you both went to London this morning."

"Yes, we did," said Dorothy, drying her tears. "It's no use my crying, Willy. I must try and help to save Percy in some way."

"Leave it to Count Bezkoﬀ."

"He is a villain!" said Lady Panwin, promptly.

"No," denied Willy; and then she told the Count's life history. It was necessary for her to break faith with him thus far, if he and Hallon were to be saved from the despairing vengeance of the Anarchists. In some way or another, it was necessary to force Lady Panwin and Dorothy to trust to the Russian. "So, you see, Count Bezkoﬀ has been driven into doing what he did by injustice. He is a good man, I am sure."

"He may have lied," said Dorothy, pondering.

"No!" said Willy, very firmly, and with a flush.

"I am quite certain that he did not lie."

"You seem to take a great interest in this man," said Lady Panwin, drily, and raised her lorgnette.

Willy blushed furiously, but was bold. "I know I do, and I may have a reason for it."

"What reason?" asked Miss Clair.

Lady Panwin laughed shortly. "I think I can guess."

"Then do not put it in words, please," said Willy, sharply. "I hardly know myself what I think of him. What we have to do is to help Percy. When he is saved you can question me as much as you like. Oh, how I do wish all these troubles were ended!" cried poor Willy, in a tone of despair.

"It is the beginning of the end now," said Lady Panwin, who had been reflecting. "As you have been frank with us, my dear, we shall be frank with you. Dorothy and myself have made a discovery."

Willy listened with great surprise and interest to the old dame's account of the memorable trip to London, and simply gasped when she heard that Mrs Broll and Julia were in the house.

"Francis is not pleased," ended Lady Panwin, "as he does not like Martha. Of course, if I explained, he would see the necessity of keeping her here. But Francis is not a safe man to trust with information when affairs are in this delicate position. Also, inadvertently, he is playing into my hands by asking the supposed Sir John to come down here to remove Martha and her companion. When he arrives I'll settle the whole matter," finished Lady Panwin, grimly.

"I think you are acting very wisely," said Willy; "and then, if the worst comes to the worst, we can search the vault."

"Why should we do that?" demanded Miss Clair, raising her head.

Willy explained. "But don't let us do that until all else fails."

Lady Panwin looked puzzled. "I really cannot see how a visit to the crypt can mend matters," she said, musingly. "Humph! Perhaps this Count Bezkoﬀ may be able to say how he came to know the way to the vault. And you know it, Dorothy tells me."

"Dorothy shewed it to me once," said Willy, flushing; "but I never told Count Bezkoﬀ about it if that is what you mean, Lady Panwin. So far as I know, he does not know the way himself."

"Yes, he does," said the elder woman, imperiously, "or he would not have made the remark. However,

we can discuss this later." And we need not search the vaults until everything else fails. Of course, I know now that Richard stole the plan out of the book when he came down here with his brother. Apparently, he had it in his mind then to murder John, and conceal his corpse in a place where he knew it would never be looked for."

"You have no proof that Richard stole the plan of the catacombs?"

"That is my opinion," said Lady Panwin, grimly, and closing the subject. "Meanwhile, we will wait for a week until Count Bezkoſſ fulfils his promise and saves poor Mr Hallon."

This being agreed upon, Willy took her departure, congratulating herself upon the fact that she had induced Dorothy and her aunt to see reason. For a week at least nothing could be done about Soho, and during that period the truth might be extracted from the false Sir John—always presuming that he was the guilty person. It seemed as though he were; but the mystery was so deep, that neither Willy nor her brother—to whom she told everything—could guess what truth would next come to light.

Then, on the ensuing day, the unexpected happened, as it had done all through this very perplexing case. Jules suddenly returned, and reported himself to Mr Clair as having been imprisoned by the Anarchists. The squire then learnt the true reason why Jules had gone to London, and he was very angry with Dorothy for sending him. Calling his sister and his daughter into the library he confronted them with—what he termed—their accomplice. Dorothy was a trifle nervous, but Lady Panwin faced the situation, and took all the blame on her shoulders, although she was as surprised as her brother himself when she learnt what Dorothy had done.

"Don't talk nonsense, Francis!" she said, tartly, when the squire had quite exhausted himself with rage. "You will only make yourself ill, and will do no good. I quite approved of Jules going." Dorothy started when her aunt spoke thus, and Jules looked approvingly at his grim mistress. "We must learn the truth of these things somehow. Please don't speak, Francis. I wish to hear Jules' story."

" Lady Panwin's influence over her brother was very great indeed, as she had decidedly the stronger mind. He grumbled a little at the way in which she spoke, but succumbed sulkily, and heard again the story of his butler, which Jules repeated for the second time in the presence of the two ladies.

It appeared, in Jules' halting English, that he had gone to Soho, and to a restaurant to make cautious inquiries. Getting into conversation with a Frenchman, he had alluded to the kidnapping of Sir John Newby, which all London knew about through the medium of the Press, and then had asked further questions about the house. The Frenchman had explained that he was suspicious of a certain house near at hand, and proposed that Jules should come there with him, to make sure that it was the goal of the millionaire, hinting also that they might get a reward if the house was traced. Jules went with the man, in all good faith, and then learnt, when imprisoned in a top room—no doubt the same in which Sir John had been confined—that the pretended Frenchman was really a Russian, and one of the members of the Vowel Society. A meeting of Anarchists had been called, and he had been examined. When they found that he was quite innocent of making any mischief they kept him prisoner for a few days and then allowed him to go, after he had promised that he would not reveal the number of the house or the street it was in. "But you must," cried Dorothy at this point. "Mr Hallon went to that house, and——"

"How did Mr Hallon find the house, mademoiselle?" asked Jules.

"Oh, what does it matter?" cried Dorothy. "But he went there, and he has disappeared. Did you see—did you hear nothing of him?"

"Why, no, mademoiselle. I was shut up in a top room, if you please."

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" said Lady Panwin, kindly, and passing her arm round the drooping girl. "You see, Jules was let off; perhaps Mr Hallon will return also, safe and sound."

"Let Jules tell me the number of the house," insisted Dorothy.

"I cannot do that, mademoiselle," said the

miserable butler. "My life would pay the forfeit if I did. I was told so;" and he shuddered.

"It is time that I exercised my authority," said Mr Clair, in a pompous voice. "Jules, you can go back to your duties, since it seems that you are not wholly to blame. Should I desire to know the number of this house you will have to tell me. Go!"

Jules bowed respectfully and went out, with a commiserating glance at Dorothy. Then Mr Clair gave his daughter a scolding, and announced that he would have no ladies of his family mixed up in these sordid matters.

"To-morrow," said Mr Clair, very decidedly, "I shall send for Inspector Trusk, of Axleigh, who previously had charge of the case. Possibly my friend, Sir John Newby, will be down to-morrow, and then we can examine Jules and make him confess all that we wish to know. You agree with me, Selina?"

"Yes," said Lady Panwin, unexpectedly; and immediately carried Dorothy beyond reach of her brother's foolish tongue. She took the girl to her bedroom, and explained that it would be better to await the gradual unfolding of events than to force them to disclose themselves precipitately. The false Sir John and Inspector Trusk would be in the library to-morrow with Mr Clair. Then Jules could be brought in and forced to reveal the whereabouts of the house. The Minters could also be invited, and if the number of Jules' prison was the same as the number on Bezkoft's card, then something would be done.

"But remember," said Lady Panwin, clinching her argument, "even if we do learn the number we must not let Inspector Trusk raid the house, unless we can be certain that Mr Hallon will not be killed."

Dorothy agreed to wait. She could do nothing else. Her lover appeared to be in a very perilous position, and in the hands of extremely desperate men. The least false step, and he might be killed out of hand. When Lady Panwin left the room the poor girl went to bed and tried to forget in sleep the terrible position of her future husband.

But sleep would not come. Dorothy tossed and tossed, and counted sheep leaping over hedges, and

caterpillars crawling up walls, and, indeed, went through all the methods which she had heard would induce slumber. It was all in vain. The night was hot and the bed was uncomfortable. Then she rose, and without lighting her candle—for the moonlight streamed into her room—she put on her dressing-gown and slippers, and sat by the window to breathe the air.

The night was very lovely, and the gardens of the Manor were bathed in wonderful white radiance. Some distance away rose the black form of the tower from amidst its circle of trees. The sky was cloudless, and nightingales were singing in the thickets. Their songs brought tears to the eyes of Dorothy, when she remembered how they sang during the golden hour when she sat with Percy under the Dancing Faun. How long ago that seemed to be!

Then a sudden thought came to her, which made her flush and rise excitedly. It was midnight, everything was still, she would not be seen. Why should she not go to Abbot Hurley's tower and again turn the Ace?—forgetting that she had not turned it on the previous visit. Then, again, Willy had said that the Count declared how the secret of all these troubles could be found in the crypt. Dorothy made up her mind at once, and dressed herself rapidly. She had brought misery on herself and her family by visiting the vault once; now she would visit it again and see if the second journey would bring better luck. Also, she might discover what Bezkoff meant.

In a few minutes she was dressed in a morning frock. She tied a woollen scarf over her head, and slipped a candle into her pocket. Then, taking her shoes in her hands, she crept down the shallow oaken stairs, and stole out by the library window—a French one; which she could open almost noiselessly. Then, lest her too vigilant aunt should chance to come down and trace her, Dorothy closed the window—that is, she drew it to, since she could not fasten it from without—and walked softly round the corner of the Manor, towards the tower of the ancient monastery.

The great pile was some little distance away, and Dorothy ran quickly across the slip of moonlight lawn, dreading lest her aunt should be up, and might

see her. But the window of Lady Panwin's bedroom was quite dark. No one was stirring, and the excitement of the adventure stole into Dorothy's young veins. She came to the ruins and entered them; entered also the door and stole down the dilapidated staircase. Then, for half a moment, she was inclined to turn back. The memory of the finding of that corpse came upon her with shuddering terror. But an ardent desire to change the luck, and to learn what Count Bezkoﬀ meant, drew her forward in spite of her feminine fears.

When below she lighted the candle, and proceeded along the narrow passage which she knew so well, and which she had last walked along with Percy. Then she fancied she heard a stealthy step, and paused in terror. Blowing out the candle she listened intently, but could hear nothing. Thinking she had been mistaken, the girl relighted the taper, and walked swiftly to the niche, wherein the key was usually placed according to tradition. There it was, where it had been left after the trouble of the murder, so it was evident that no one had been to the vault since then. Dorothy took down the key and slipped it into the lock. To turn it she had to place the candle on the ground. Shortly she managed to turn the key and open the heavy door. Reaching for the candle she walked in timidly. As she did so, and just as she took three steps into the crypt, the door closed with a crash. Dorothy was terrified out of her wits. It could not be the wind, since there was no wind in these catacombs. Someone must have followed her. Who could it be?

She ran to the door again, but before she could try and open it a kind of groan made her turn sharply. She saw, on the stone table whereon the corpse had rested, another body! With a desperate effort she went up and held the candle over the face. Then she dropped it with a cry of terror. Before her, gagged and bound, lay Percy Hallon, alive but helpless.

CHAPTER XXVI

To her dying day Dorothy never knew how she kept her senses at that critical moment. The grim, silent, damp vault; the thick darkness; the unexpected closing of the door, which in itself was enough to scare an ordinary woman, and the momentary glimpse of her helpless lover, bound like a victim on that evil table—these things were nerve-shaking and tremendous. But the very terror of the situation wrought her up to immediate effort. Without thinking of the closed door, without considering the Cimmerian gloom, she tore frantically at the many ropes which paralysed Hallon's limbs. But after that one wild cry, wrung from her by the sudden shock to her nerves, she made no sound. She wanted to keep her strength to save and release her lover. But how was she to do this, in Heaven's name? And then the thought flashed into her brain and out again like lightning—how had Percy come to lie in this dreadful position?

For a time she fumbled with the ropes, but on finding her efforts vain, she cooled down to unnatural self-control. Taking a calmer view of the singular situation she reflected that it would be best to light the candle. Then she could remove the gag and untie the bonds. Afterwards—. But she did not think further ahead, since the necessities of the moment had to be attended to. Percy, by inarticulate gurglings and writhings like a marionette, was evidently trying to make her understand that he had recognised her face before the light went out. Feeling in the darkness Dorothy discovered, more by intuition than in any other way, that the gag in Hallon's mouth was of the kind known in mediæval times as "a pear." There was a similar one in the Manor library, which

had been found in the monastic ruins, and she knew well how to touch the spring. In a moment her nimble fingers had closed the four quarters of the pear, and she slipped it out of Percy's mouth. He sighed with relief, but his jaw was too sore to permit immediate speech. Almost as though she were in a dream—and, indeed, the whole episode smacked of nightmare—Dorothy relighted the candle, which was easily done, since she had brought a box of matches with her. When the light grew stronger she held the candle to her lover's face, and saw that it was pale and streaked with blood. He smiled faintly as their eyes met, and murmured an endearing word. She kissed him silently, and then set to work on the ropes. They were many, and the knots were tied hard and fast. Percy could not assist, as his fingers were too numb, so Dorothy had to begin and finish the task unaided. In ten minutes, as it seemed—although she took no note of time—she had set him free, and he made an effort to rise. But for the moment, strong man as he was, he found it impossible. His lips moved.

"There's some water--yonder," he whispered, brokenly.

With the aid of the candle Dorothy found a china jug filled with water, and held it to Percy's lips. He drank greedily, and his tongue and throat being moistened began to talk easier.

"How did you find me out?" he asked, weakly.

"Hush!" she said, quickly. "Wait until you feel stronger," and then she began to rub his hands and arms to restore the currents of the blood to their normal circulation.

Shortly this attention had its due effect. Percy soon was able to move his fingers, then his hands, finally his arms, and worked himself at changing his legs, to overcome the numbness. In less time than Dorothy thought possible, considering the dire position in which she had found him, Percy was walking about the cell, gathering fresh life with every exertion of his energy. While he was thus restoring his vigour, Dorothy went to the door and tried it.

"Locked!" she said, with a cry of dismay.

"Who can have locked it?" asked Hallon, coming to assist her in shaking the heavy portal.

"I don't know, unless it is Hobson, who inspects the ruins every night by order of Inspector Trusk. But, then, he would not know the way to the crypt. Someone must have seen me leave the house and come here, Percy. But who can the person be?"

"One of those who captured me," said Hallon, promptly.

"Who are they?"

"I can't tell you. The faces I saw are all strange to me. I went to the Soho house, Dorothy, and was struck from behind. When I revived, in a small, bare room, I was given wine, which I took readily enough, since I felt faint with the blow. I immediately went to sleep again, and guess that I was drugged. When I came to my senses once more, I was lying bound and gagged on yonder table. How long I have been here I do not know; how I was brought here I cannot say. But in the darkness someone has come in at intervals with food and water. I expect we are both in the power of the Anarchists, though how they came to know of this crypt I cannot guess."

"How do you know that you are in the crypt," asked Dorothy, "since you were brought here insensible and have been in the darkness ever since?"

"I knew that I was on a stone table," explained Hallon, "and I remembered seeing it when you and I found the corpse of Sir John. Then when I saw your face, Dorothy, I became certain that I was imprisoned in Abbot Hurley's vault. It was all supposition before. But perhaps I am wrong?"

"No, you are quite right. This is the crypt. Count Bezkoft told Wilky that the source of all our troubles was to be found in the vault, so as I could not sleep, I made up my mind to come and see what he meant. Also, I thought that I might tempt Fate again and turn the Devil's Ace."

"No, don't!" cried Hallon, passing his arm round her. "Our previous visit started all these worries, and if you turn that card we may get into greater difficulties."

"I don't see that we could be in a more difficult

position," said Dorothy, dismally. "Here we are, you and I, shut up in this vault, and no one is likely to think of our being here."

"Not your father, or aunt, or anyone we know?" said Percy consolingly. "But if, as I suspect, the Anarchists are mixed up in these matters, we shall receive a visit from some of these gentry. Come, Dorothy"—he drew her to the stone table—"sit beside me and tell me exactly what Bezkoﬀ said. Willy confessed how she had helped him to escape, and I got the Soho address from the card he gave her. Since I am in this horrible position, I think that Bezkoﬀ is a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Willy does not think so," said Dorothy; and related everything she knew of the relations between Miss Minter and the Count.

Hallon listened with great attention. "Perhaps Bezkoﬀ will come over to the side of law and order and help us to clear up these mysteries, my dear," he said, thoughtfully, "if only because he loves Willy."

"Oh! Percy, do you think he does?"

"Of course. It is a case of love at first sight, both on his part and on Willy's. Bezkoﬀ now wants to get free of Anarchism, and marry respectably. I am sure of that. But the Anarchists will not let him go so easily, unless the whole of this Vowel Society is blown up, or hanged, or put out of existence in some way. While any one member of the gang lives Bezkoﬀ will be in danger of his life. I am quite sure that these devils killed Sir John."

"But, Percy," asked the girl, significantly, "do you really believe Sir John to be dead?"

"Eh—what? My dear girl, we saw his corpse on this very table."

"We saw Richard's corpse."

"No, Dorothy. Richard masqueraded as Sir John, and was killed in his place. Don't you remember the clue of the silver watch. Sir John explained that to me."

"Richard explained it to you. John was really killed, and Richard placed the silver watch in his pocket that the mistake might be made. Then he came out into the world as his brother."

"Are you sure of this, Dorothy?" asked Hallon, very much astonished.

"My aunt thinks so, and Mrs Broll confesses that my aunt is right."

"Tell me everything that has occurred—exactly, mind."

Dorothy did as she was told, and shortly Percy was in full possession of all that had taken place.

"Mrs Broll is now at the Manor, dearest," said the girl, "and the false Sir John is coming down to-morrow. Jules also came back—in fact, things seem to be coming to a crisis."

"I wish I were above ground to see what will happen," said Hallon, in a thoughtful manner.

"What will become of us?"

The question was answered in a most unexpected way. Even while Hallon spoke the sound of a key was heard, and the door opened in a slow manner. Someone entered carrying a lantern, and by its light and the feeble illumination of their own candle the lovers saw that the newcomer was accompanied by two other men, muffled up in foreign-looking cloaks, with soft hats pulled down over their eyes. But the first man who entered wore ordinary clothes, and as he raised his lantern to look at the faces of the prisoners the two saw his countenance most distinctly.

"Jules!" cried Dorothy, slipping off the table.

"Oh! now we are safe."

It was indeed Jules, looking more meek and mild than ever. How he came to know of the existence of the vault, why he should have entered it at midnight hour, and why he should be accompanied by the two men, who posted themselves at the closed door, neither Dorothy nor Percy could understand.

"You are free, I see," said Jules, quietly; and even in the amazement of the moment Dorothy noted that his English was much better.

"Yes, I unbound him," she said, quickly. "But, Jules, what are you doing here?"

"That is a long story, Miss Clair, and one which I cannot tell until I have made things safe. Mr Hallon must not be permitted to get away." And he made a sign to the two men.

Without a word they threw themselves on Percy

and began to bind him again with the ropes. The young man fought for a few moments, but he had not yet recovered his full strength, so passively permitted himself to be rendered helpless again. He could do nothing else. But Dorothy flew to help him, and found herself caught round the waist by the watchful Jules.

"How dare you!" she cried, trying to release herself.

"Be quiet," he whispered, "or I shall order you to be bound also."

"You dare to——"

"I dare anything. I am the head of the Vowel Society, of which Sir John Newby"—he sneered when he pronounced the name—"may have told you. Jules is my name, Miss Clair, but I am also 'A,' the first of the Vowels. 'You understand?'"

Dorothy did not listen to half he said, since she was struggling all the time. "Let me go! Let me go!" she panted.

"Dorothy, do not fight against things, as they are," cried Percy, as he was dragged again to the table by the two men. "Jules will do you no harm, I am sure."

"Quite right, Mr Hallon," said the butler. "You are very sensible. I have a kindly feeling for Miss Clair, but if she goes against my will it may change to indifference."

"You villain!" said Dorothy, twisting herself free, and striking him across the face; very rashly, it must be confessed, considering the circumstances.

He merely laughed. "That blow wipes out all your kindness to me while I was ill, Miss Clair. Now I regard you as one who must be dealt with severely. You and Mr Hallon have crossed my path—our path," added Jules, with emphasis, "the path of the Vowel Society. You shall both be put out of the way, unless——"

"Unless what?" called out Percy from the table, upon which he now lay, trussed like a fowl.

"Unless Sir John Newby buys your freedom."

"Richard you mean."

Jules gave an odd laugh, which sounded eerie in the vault. "You will find it difficult to prove that,"

he said; "that is, if I give you the chance." "No"—he addressed the two underlings, who were still hovering over the helpless man—"do not gag him. You can go. Wait outside. I have something to say to these aristocrats, and Mr Hallon shall be free to answer me. If Miss Clair makes any difficulty I shall call you in to bind her."

"You confounded scoundrel!" said Hallon, savagely, when the two men had left the crypt and closed the door. "Were I free, I would kill you. And if you hurt Miss Clair, I'll break your neck as soon as I am free!"

The butler laughed and lighted a thin black cigar. "That is the very point, Mr Hallon--when you are free. I may not see fit to set you free, or Miss Clair either."

"We shall be searched for."

"Not in this direction," said Jules, easily. "You are supposed to have vanished in London. Miss Clair came here secretly. I alone saw her when she entered the ruins above, and I followed to lock the door when she entered."

"Oh!" cried Dorothy, kneeling beside Hallon. "It was you whom I heard when I put the light out?"

"Why, yes. I often come to the tower on business connected with our society. This"—he glanced round—"is our meeting-place, and a very safe one it is. I have always congratulated myself on its discovery."

"Oh!" cried Dorothy again. "Then it was you, Jules, who stole the plan of the catacombs from that book in the library."

"Exactly. But if you will listen, I will tell you how I came to steal it. You must know my position, so that your own may be arranged. I have no wish to hurt either of you; but everything, even your lives, must give way to the interests of the society."

"I wish to hear nothing," said Miss Clair, disdainfully.

"I do," said Hallon, quickly. "Jules, you are a scoundrel, and you have scored this time. But our time may come. When it does, I won't spare you in

any way. Tell your story, if you will, but remember that if we get away I shall use it to punish you."

"If you get away!" scoffed Jules, derisively. "Oh, I am quite easy on that point. It all depends upon our friend Sir John."

"Richard," said Dorothy, obstinately.

"I prefer to call him John," retorted Jules, lightly. "However, I have no time to waste. Listen, and you will see that you are both absolutely helpless in the power of our society. I can tell you all in ten minutes."

"We are waiting," said Hallon, quietly; and, with Dorothy kneeling beside him, he prepared to listen.

Jules commenced at once, and continued without interruption. "Our society," he said, "was formed to get money to carry on the revolution in Russia. We tried to get Sir John Newby to join, but he would not. However, his brother Richard turned out to be a scoundrel and a forger. We learnt that—it matters not how—and made use of our knowledge. Knowing that Sir John Newby was a great friend of my honoured master, I got myself engaged here as a butler. It was then at frequent intervals that I heard the legend of the Devil's Ace and of this vault. I thought that a secret place, protected by superstition, would be a safe meeting-room for our Society. I therefore stole the plan of the catacombs, of which I had heard from the housekeeper, and found the vault. Then I told our members, and the whole thirty-five of us—a small society, you see—came down to these parts."

"What," asked Hallon, sharply, "and without the police knowing?"

"You forget," said Jules, coolly, "there is only one policeman in this village—Hobson—and he is a fool. When we want to have a meeting we easily get him inveigled to another part of the country. Then our members arrive as tramps in some instances—there are many tramps hereabouts, as you know, Mr Hallon—others come in motor-cars or by railway. And as all come at night, and singly in every instance, you can see that there is nothing likely to excite the suspicions of the authorities. In Russia there would

be; but you English people are such fools that you never see what goes on under your noses."

"But you can't get into the grounds without suspicion?" said Dorothy.

"Why not? We do not come up the avenue. You forget the path which leads here from the Cuckoo's Grove, Miss Clair."

"Oh!" cried Dorothy, for the third time. "And it was along that path that you brought the corpse of Richard Newby?"

"You want to know too much," said Jules, drily. "Later you may learn the truth—when we have the Newby millions. Just now I decline to say anything further than that I wrote the letter asking Sir John to come down. Richard intercepted the letter, and came himself."

"Sir John came also," cried Percy. "What happened then?"

"I refuse to tell you as yet. You will hear to-morrow night. We are going to have a meeting here, and everything will be made clear."

"But surely you won't keep Mr Hallon and myself in the vault?" said Dorothy, starting up in alarm.

"Oh, Jules, let us go!"

"No," said the butler, inflexibly. "You know too much, both of you, and, therefore, are dangerous. If you will meddle with things which do not concern you, you must take the consequences. Now Mr Hallon will remain here, and you, Miss Clair, will be placed in an adjoining vault. Don't struggle, it will be the worse for you."

"Percy!" cried the girl, now thoroughly terrified.

"Oh, you demon—you beast!" cried Hallon, and tried to get free.

He only exhausted himself with the effort, and heard Dorothy forced out of the crypt by the treacherous butler without being able to save her. When the door was closed, and he was once more in darkness, his feelings can be better imagined than described. In that hour Hallon felt that life was more bitter than death. But what could he do?

CHAPTER XXVII

JULES was a traitor and a cruel-hearted Anarchist, as Dorothy thought, when he thrust her into another vault; but she could not complain of his treatment, other than, for the safety of the Vowel Society, he held her prisoner. Before dawn, he brought her some hot coffee and a plate of cold meat, along with bread. Notwithstanding her anxiety, Dorothy was young enough to feel extremely hungry, and therefore made an excellent breakfast. And the irony of the situation was that the butler placed before her a pack of cards, so that she could play "patience"—a game he knew she was fond of—and left behind him three or four candles so that she should not be in complete darkness. Decidedly, Jules had not entirely forgotten her kindness to him during his illness. Finally, he had promised to treat Hallon well, and to release him from his bonds. But he would not allow her to go into the other vault.

It was no use raging, and still more useless to think of escape, so Dorothy made the best of an impossible situation. It seemed incredible that she should thus be held prisoner within a stone's throw of her own home, and with relatives and friends looking for her. Of course, she was well aware that they would look, but she was equally certain that no one would search the catacombs. Mr Clair always objected, on the score of the family legend, that anyone should descend into the depths; and it would never occur to him—or, indeed, to anyone else—that she had gone down to so haunted a place in the dead of night. Dorothy could not blame herself that she had come, since by doing so she had found the lost Hallon. But it was rather unfortunate that, now he was discovered, she could do nothing to help him.

He was a prisoner, she was a prisoner. There was no chance of release for either of them, unless— And here Dorothy began to consider if Sir John, or rather Richard, would buy the liberty of herself and her lover.

From what she knew of Richard, and from what she had heard of him, she rather thought that, when face to face with the Vowel Society, he would decline to do anything. Certainly, seeing that he had—as Dorothy now began to believe—killed his millionaire brother, he would be forced to buy the silence of the Anarchists with a round million, if not more. But once he made himself safe, he would not be inclined to surrender more money to free Hallon and herself. Of course, there was the chance that the Society, satisfied with the million paid by Richard for his own safety, might let Percy and her go free. She hoped that it might be so. And, indeed, if Jules and his gang secured the money they wanted, they would undoubtedly go to Russia, there to sow more dissension. In that event the evidence of herself and Hallon could do the Society no harm, and it would not be worth while detaining them. Jules was a political fanatic, but he had some sort of a heart, as he had shewn, and would not kill in England for the sake of killing, whatever he might do in his own country. In this way Dorothy comforted herself through the long hours of the day, and between intervals of thought, she played "patience" in a manner which justified its name.

Naturally, Percy thought of her all the day. But Jules released him from the ropes, and brought him food, and gave him a book and a stock of candles, and assured him that Dorothy was being well-treated, so the young man felt more at ease in his mind. He would dearly have liked to knock Jules down and escape to raise the village; but the butler always brought his two underlings with him, so such a violent mode of getting free was not to be thought of. All that could be done under the circumstances was to wait for the assembling of the Anarchists, and then in one way or another he and Dorothy would know of their fate. But, like the girl herself, Percy did not believe that the Vowel Society would go

so far as to murder them both. Yet Hallon shuddered to think how easily the two of them could be killed and buried in the vaults. If the society dispersed quietly, then no one would ever know what had become of the unfortunate lovers.

Hallon could not help admiring the dexterity with which Jules had availed himself of the family legend. Probably he had come down originally (knowing, as he confessed, that Newby was an intimate friend of Mr Clair's) to see as much of the millionaire as possible, and to take every opportunity to work on his feelings, so as to get money. But Sir John had evidently proved impossible, so use was made of Richard. In some way Jules and his friends had learnt of Richard Newby's rascalities, and thus had lured him to the Cuckoo's Grove. When Sir John followed, on the information of Mrs Broll, anxious to save her favourite, Richard had apparently murdered him with the knife which he had taken from the library, and which he had perhaps brought with the intention of killing the writer of the letter, who knew so much about his past. Then the Anarchists had kidnapped him, and at Soho had threatened to have him accused of murder unless he surrendered a million. That was the case, as Percy thought it out; and from all he could see, and from what he knew, his surmise was correct. Richard Newby was the murderer, and the mystery of how the body had got into the vault was clear. There seemed to be no doubt but what Jules had carried it there, since, from the stolen plan, he knew how to find the crypt.

Percy also remembered the numbers of tramps which infested Beltan and Axleigh. Undoubtedly—and on Jules's confession—many of these were Anarchists, who chose that way to avoid suspicion, when they came to meet under Abbot Eurlay's Tower. And, then, any who came in motor-cars or carts or on bicycles could easily slip into the grounds of the Manor House by the winding path which led from the Cuckoo's Grove across the meadowlands, and then passed through the trees to the ruined Tower itself. The whole idea was very ingenious, and a quiet country village was the last place where the

authorities would suspect Anarchists were to be found.

In this way Percy and Dorothy passed the long day—and to both of them it seemed extremely long. However, as they were underground, they did not know when the day ended and the night began. Dorothy had no watch, and Hallon's had been taken from him by a dishonest Anarchist in Soho. Therefore the time of the meeting arrived speedier than they had imagined it would. Dorothy, who had fallen asleep, was aroused from slumber by a hand on her shoulder, and saw before her a man with a lantern—apparently one of the two underlings of Jules. He told her to come to the meeting, and she recognised his voice.

"Count Bezkoﬀ!" she exclaimed, starting to her feet.

"Hush!" he said, softly. "Do not say a word. I am your friend, and the friend of Mr Hallon. For Miss Minter's sake I have promised to save you. Rely on me."

"What will you do?" she asked, in a whisper.

"Nothing at present. Wait until the meeting is over."

"Am I missed in the Manor House?"

"Yes. Every one is searching for you. But the police have not been called in, since it is supposed we are holding Mr Hallon as a hostage, and his life may be forfeited if the law is invoked to assist. It is lucky the police are not here," added Bezkoﬀ, thankfully, "as the whole of our society are in the vault to-night, and even coming singly it would have been difficult to avoid suspicion had Trusk and his men turned up."

"But Hobson?"

"He has been decoyed to a place two miles away—within his beat, certainly, but distant from the Manor House. Not a word more. Hold your tongue and do not shew anger. I'll do all I can to help you."

"Can you?" pleaded Dorothy, eagerly.

"Yes—so long as the society thinks I am faithful. If they guessed that I was betraying them, I should be killed. Silence!"

Dorothy obeyed him, and said no more. Her heart

beat rapidly as she was led into the vault. It was lighted with many lamps and candles, and crowded with people, both men and women. Some were foreigners, and others English; some were well dressed and others were in rags. But one and all had very bright eyes and lean faces, and seemed to be devoured by fanaticism. Percy, unbound, was at the far end of the vault, and Dorothy was led up to him.

"You can sit together," said Bezkoﬀ, coldly; but, of course, his coldness was for the benefit of the society.

"My darling!" whispered Percy, and he clasped her hand; nor did he release it until the meeting was at an end.

Jules was seated on a stool at the head of the stone table. On this were writing materials; but there was no sign of wine or food. Apparently the Vowel Society had met strictly for business, and did not want to eat or drink. Dorothy looked for the false Sir John, but could see no sign of him. Before she could ask where he was, the proceedings commenced.

These were characterised by little formality. Jules, as A, with the other heads of the society, termed respectively E, I, O, and U, sat round the stone table. The remaining members lounged against the walls, or sat on the stone floor, to the number of thirty. Jules did most of the speaking, and reports were handed in by various people regarding the work of the association in connection with the procuring of money for the cause. The usual business terminated, the question of the moment was broached by Jules.

The butler, who looked as meek and mild as ever, and who was still wearing his livery, explained that Sir John Newby, so-called, had come down that day to the Manor House, and had been brought at midnight to the tower. When the society were made acquainted with the reason for his having been brought before them, he would be introduced. Jules then stated that, failing to get Sir John Newby to give money for the cause, he and the four other heads had tried to inveigle Richard, hoping in some way to utilise the resemblance between the twins. Luckily, Jules had found out the rascalities of Richard—he did not announce what these were—and so had been able,

under a threat of exposure, to bind Richard to the interests of the society. Jules had written the letter asking Sir John to come to Cuckoo's Grove on his way to the Manor House, in the hope that a last appeal might be made to him.

"In fact," Jules went on to say in French—and Hallon translated most of his speech to Dorothy—"I hoped to force him to give us money—a few thousands—by threatening to denounce Richard who was a forger and a thief."

"He only forged his brother, Sir John's, name," called out Hallon; "and Sir John would not prosecute."

"There you are wrong, Mr Hallon," said Jules, calmly, although some of the other members scowled at the interruption. "Richard had forged several other names, and also had stolen money. I obtained evidence of these things, and could have had him prosecuted. This was my reason for asking Sir John to meet me—not knowing my name—in the Cuckoo's Grove. I intended to ask for money, or else denounce Richard, and drag the name of Newby in the mud. However, being in the service of Mr Clair, I could not get to the Grove at the appointed time, and so I was some minutes late—in fact, fifteen minutes. There I found, as I thought, Sir John contemplating the body of Richard. But a few words soon shewed me that he really was Richard, looking at the body of Sir John. I then threatened to denounce Richard for the crime, unless he assumed the character of Sir John and got us the money. Since Richard is an accomplished forger he can easily do this, for he can imitate Sir John's signature exactly. Also, since he was his brother's secretary, he is easily able to handle the business, knowing all about it."

"But there is a difference between the twins," said Hallon again.

"Not in looks, Mr Hallon; and Richard was easily able to assume the peculiarities of his brother. However, Richard accepted, and I took him, with the body of his brother—we carried it between us—by the winding path to this vault. In the night, Richard went up to London, as it was necessary to invent the comedy of the kidnapping, that nothing might

connect Richard with the crime. He insisted that this should be done, so that the blame might be laid on us. After a certain period he left Soho, and went to his brother's house. You know all that has happened since then."

He wiped his forehead, and there ensued a lull of conversation amongst the members of the society. Bezukoff, who was at Dorothy's elbow, said nothing; and when next Jules began to speak, it was about the lovers.

"With regard to the strangers sitting yonder," said Jules, pointing to Hallon and his beloved. "We have had to keep them prisoners because they have been meddling with things which do not concern them. There is no need of further explanation, save for me to say that they know too much. I propose to invite Sir John, alias Richard Newby, in to face this meeting, and extract from him a cheque for one million—in fact, several cheques, since it will be difficult to get one million paid in one. Then we will let these young people go, and promise to hold our tongues about Richard's assassination of his brother."

CHAPTER XXVIII

BEFORE any argument could ensue as to the advisability of acting in this way—and several Anarchists seemed ready to speak—a member went out, and immediately returned with Richard. He looked much the same as he had done, and even was more composed. The likeness to his brother was remarkable, to say the least of it, and of course, as he was wearing the grey clothes and white waistcoat which the millionaire invariably affected, the resemblance became even more striking. Dorothy no longer wondered that she, and her father, and many others had been deceived. Mrs Broll and Lady Panwin had been sharper, and Dorothy mentally congratulated them on their cleverness in piercing the disguise.

Richard avoided looking at Hallon and Miss Clair, as he must have known that they were aware of the truth, and apparently was anxious to spare himself an awkward meeting. He took his place at the foot of the stone table, and Jules spoke.

"I have explained to our members," said Jules, in English, "that you murdered your brother, Sir John Newby."

"That is not true," said the man, calmly.

"What! Do you deny that you are Richard?"

"No. But I deny that I murdered my brother. I came down to the Cuckoo's Grove to meet the person who had written that anonymous letter to Sir John; and, arriving a trifle late, I found that John had come before me—as I understand that my nurse had told him of my journey—and I found him dead. You accused me of the crime, and I could not defend myself. Therefore, I am in your hands. As I am playing the part of my brother with great success, and no one knows that I am Richard, I can give you what money you want."

"You had better," said Jules, threateningly. "If you do not, you will be denounced by us."

"And so you will get yourselves into trouble," said Newby, coldly.

"Oh, no! We have arranged all that. I am simply Mr Clair's butler. I went to Belton to get some white vinegar on that evening, as Lady Panwin can assure you. I came to the Grove. I saw you strike the blow, and——"

"You did not!"

"What of that?" asked Jules, with a shrug. "I can say that I did, and you will be hanged. If you state that I am an Anarchist you will only be laughed at. No one knows of our meeting in this place, and no one can connect me with the Soho house. And I may tell you, Mr Newby—or," added the man, mockingly, "rather I should say Sir John—that if you sent the police here they would meet with a terrible doom."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We could disperse. But when the police were in this tower—in this vault—they would be blown up. Beneath this tower I have contrived to lay many barrels of gunpowder brought by our friends."

"You are a villain!" said Richard, choking with rage.

"And you are a murderer, deny it as you may. Come now, Sir John"—again with a sneer—"you must arrange to pay us one million pounds."

"And if I do that?"

"Then we will take the money and go to Russia to carry out our plans, and no one will ever know that you killed your brother."

"I did not!" said Newby again—and earnestly.

There were murmurs, for the patience of the members was getting exhausted. "You know what we can hang you," said Jules, sharply. "There is no more time to talk. Arrange to give us the money—write us several cheques—and you will be safe."

"I agree!" said Newby, and the vault rang with applause.

"On one condition," he went on; and murmurs arose.

"On no condition!" cried Jules, angrily.

"On condition!" pursued Richard, imperturbably, "that you release Miss Clair and Mr Hallon at once."

"We agree to that—but they shall be set free to-morrow morning. Of course," added Jules, turning to Percy, "if you betray anything Mr Newby will be blown up."

"What do you mean?" asked Hallon, startled.

"What I say," rejoined the butler tartly. "You must not bring the police on us. We shall hold Richard as a hostage until these cheques are paid. If you tell what you know, or betray the secret of the tower, you will hear an explosion, and Richard Newby will be blown to pieces. Afterwards," said Jules, significantly, "our society will deal with you."

"I refuse—" began Dorothy, when Bezkoﬀ touched her arm.

"Consent! It is your only chance of escape," he said, softly.

Hallon saw that, and agreed. "Only one thing do I ask," he declared, after a pause. "Is Mr Newby ready to remain as a hostage?"

"There seems to be no choice," said Richard, not looking at him. "I shall sign these cheques. Give me a pen."

"Wait!" said Jules, pointing to the lovers. "Take Mr Hallon to one vault, and Miss Clair into another. To-morrow they shall be set free."

"But how can I explain my absence?" demanded Dorothy, as Bezkoﬀ hurried her to the door.

"I'll tell you that to-morrow," said Jules, with a cynical smile—"As Mr Clair's butler, of course. But remember that if you or Mr Hallon betray us, the man who has saved you"—he pointed to Richard, who stood waiting, pen in hand—"will be killed."

Then Hallon and Dorothy were led out, safe for the time being, but at the cost of absolute secrecy. Percy threw a glance over his shoulder just before the door closed, and saw that Richard Newby was already signing the cheques which were to buy their freedom and his own life as a murderer.

CHAPTER XXIX

GREAT was Mr. Clair's joy when his daughter reappeared at nine o'clock the next morning. The poor old squire was not pompous now, since, in his own way, he loved Dorothy dearly, and could not understand how she had vanished so mysteriously. In spite of the warning of Willy that Hallon's life would pay for the intervention of the police, Mr. Clair had decided that very day to send for Inspector Trusk. The arrival of Dorothy put an end to the necessity of this, and she was welcomed by her father and Lady Panwin with great joy.

"But what became of you? Where have you been?" asked Lady Panwin, who was the first to recover her self-control.

Dorothy answered readily enough. Jules, true to his promise, had instructed her what to say; and Jules, meek and timid in looks as ever, was hovering round the breakfast-table waiting to hear if she would keep her promise about necessary concealment for Newby's sake. Dorothy suppressed a shudder when she saw the dangerous little man, and lost no time in answering. "It was my own fault," she said, quietly. "On the night before last, instead of going to bed, I sat up fretting after Percy. Then the idea came into my head to once more go to the crypt, and see if I could find the Ace to turn it. I went down after midnight, and left the house by the library window. But when I got down into the catacombs, I grew confused, and lost my way. I wandered about all night, and then slept for hours in some part I knew nothing about. I was quite lost, and only this morning did I find the right passage. Then I came up at once, as I knew you must have been much distressed about me."

She paused, and Mr Clair readily swallowed the story, although Lady Panwin raised her eyebrows. It struck her as improbable. However, she held her peace, and the squire answered. "I ought to be very angry with you, Dorothy. You went down to that fatal crypt against my express desire, and you have caused your aunt and myself great pain. We could not understand what had become of you."

"You understand now?"

"Oh, yes. It shows me how very wide-spreading those catacombs must be. I shall see about getting them explored. But I shall say nothing more, as doubtless you have been sufficiently punished by the misery you have undergone. My poor child"—Mr Clair kissed her forehead—"I wonder this experience did not turn your hair white. To be lost underground! Dreadful! And you must have been starving."

Lady Panwin grunted. Dorothy did not look as if she had been starving, and when she sat down to the table did not eat nearly so heartily as a starving person would have done. Also, she made no remark about Hallon, which seemed strange, considering how deeply she loved him. The fact was, that Jules had also arranged for the entrance of Percy in a way which would not betray the truth, and Dorothy knew that a London telegram—sent by an obliging member of the society who had returned to town in a motor-car—would arrive shortly. Lady Panwin, being desperately sharp, noted everything, and was about to put Dorothy through a stiff examination, when Mrs Bröll entered in a great state of alarm.

"Oh, my lady, my lady!" she said, throwing up her hands. "Such a dreadful thing, my lady. John has vanished!"

Mr Clair jumped up as quickly as his age would let him. "When will there be an end to these dreadful things?" he asked, in an agonised tone. "You must be mistaken, Mrs Bröll. We expect Sir John down to breakfast. He was perfectly well when he retired to bed last night, although, like all of us, he was upset by the disappearance of Miss Clair. Explain yourself."

"I can't explain, sir, any more than I have

explained," sobbed Mrs Broll, with her apron to her eyes. "John has vanished like a ghost. I went up to take him the cup of tea he likes in the morning, knowing he would rise late, and I find the bed hasn't been slept in; and the window open, and his dress suit taken off, and his grey day clothes taken away—and—and—oh dear me! What has become of the only one of those lovely twins left to me?"

"Perhaps Sir John went out for a walk," suggested Lady Panwin, and looked at Dorothy. It struck her as strange that the girl did not express her astonishment: But, naturally enough, Miss Clair, still under the sharp black eyes of the hovering Jules, was looking down confusedly.

"He couldn't have been walking every night—I mean all night," exclaimed Mrs Broll, quite flustered. "I think there must be a curse on this house."

"Did you see Sir John Newby, Jules?" asked Mr Clair, directly.

"Oh, vo, monsieur. He retire las' night, and no come here dis mornin'." Then he glanced stealthily at Dorothy, and she noted that his English again was imperfect. Jules was a born actor, and played his part excellently. He even deceived Lady Panwin, sharp as she was.

Dorothy went up to her room to lie down, saying that she was worn out, and the rest dispersed to search for Sir John. All the servants were pressed into the hunt; but, in spite of every hole and corner being thoroughly searched, no sign of the missing man could be discovered. Lady Panwin suggested that, like Dorothy, he might have gone down the crypt and have got lost, but Mr Clair scouted the idea, and would not permit anyone to descend. Not that anyone was particularly anxious to go. Even in daylight the Manor servants disliked burrowing under that tower of ill-fame. It was just as well, as Dorothy learnt later, when she went to walk in the garden.

"We must send for the police, after all," said Mr Clair, when all search proved futile.

"Remember what Willy said about Mr Hallon's

life," said Lady Panwin, warningly. "If the police interfere, he will lose it."

"Then what is to be done?" said the squire, helplessly.

"Let us wait for a few hours," advised the old dame. "After all, Sir John may have gone out for a walk."

"I don't believe it. Sir John is not a fool."

Lady Panwin quite agreed with this, and, in reality, did not believe what she said. But until Hallon was rescued it was her one desire to keep Francis from communicating with the authorities. At twelve o'clock Dorothy came down to luncheon, and played her part in the comedy very well. During the meal a telegram arrived. Jules brought it to Miss Clair, looking as demure as a cat, and secretly amused.

"Oh!" cried Dorothy, trying her best to assume joy and feigned surprise. "It's from Percy. Listen, father—listen, auntie"; and she read: "'Have escaped. Coming down by four o'clock train.—PERCY.'"

"Thank Heaven!" cried the squire, pleased with the news.

Lady Panwin took the telegram and looked at it grimly. She saw no reason to doubt its truth, especially as Dorothy was indulging in a flood of delighted tears.

"Francis," she said, gravely, "you can send for the police now to look into this matter of Sir John's since Mr Hallon is safe."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Dorothy, terrified at the mere idea, and Jules, at the sideboard, turned to look stealthily and uneasily at his mistress.

As there was another meeting of Anarchists on that very night in the vault, he certainly did not want Trusk and his minions to haunt the grounds. These too-zealous constables, sharper than Hobson, might discover more than was good for them, or for the society.

Lady Panwin turned sharply on Dorothy.

"And why not?" she asked, pointedly.

"It might be dangerous," stammered the girl.

"To whom?"

"They might follow Percy and kill him," said Dorothy, at her wits' end to prevent the police coming. "Wait, wait at least until Percy arrives, and we hear what he has to say. He will come to the Manor some time after five o'clock."

"Yes," said Mr Clair, after reflection, but looking careworn, "that will be best, Selina, I think. Mr Hallon will have to take the trouble of this search for Sir John off my shoulders. I am not fit for it. The events of the last month have quite broken me down."

So it was arranged, and Lady Panwin sniffed. She was more certain than ever that Dorothy was hiding something, and that the story of being lost in the catacombs was a myth. However, she determined to abide her time until Hallon arrived. Then she would force Dorothy to explain. Lady Panwin was as keen as a hound on the scent, and made up her mind to know everything.

After luncheon, Mrs Broll went wandering about the place, wringing her hands, and calling at intervals on Sir John. If he were lost she would be placed in an embarrassing position, and she really could not think what had become of him. Lady Panwin looked at all this disdainfully, as she well knew that it was her favourite Richard for whom Mrs Broll was lamenting. But Mr Clair did not know this, as on the previous day, when the false Sir John was visible, no explanation had been brought about.

"I believe," said Lady Panwin to the housekeeper, "that Richard has run away, as he guessed that I knew the truth."

"I'm sure that I never told him," sobbed Mrs Broll. "You are too hard on poor Richard, my lady."

"Then you don't know where he is?"

"No, I don't, your ladyship. And I didn't come down here to be insulted," cried Mrs Broll, indignantly. "I have put up with much, but I shall put up with no more. I shall leave this house, and not enter it again until Sir John returns."

"Until Richard does, you mean," said Lady Panwin, drily. "Don't keep up that fiction, now that we are alone."

Mrs. Broll dropped an early Victorian curtsey, and walked out on to the lawn. Julia was engaged in reading in her bedroom, and Mrs. Broll was glad to be alone, with her own thoughts, although these were none of the most pleasant. She wandered aimlessly about, and finally selected a secluded seat behind the Dancing Faun, in a spot where no one could see her. There she sat, looking like an old witch in the sunlight, and thought of what was to be done. After a time she dozed, and finally fell asleep.

Percy duly arrived, and Dorothy flew to his arms. Lady Panwin watched the meeting, which was quite warm enough to satisfy her. The young man told a story of incarceration in the topmost room of the Soho house, and related, dramatically, how he had escaped by bribing his gaoler with his watch. He had, he said, discovered nothing.

"The police may discover much," said Lady Panwin, when he had finished.

"I don't think it is wise to speak of the police just now," remonstrated Hallon, quickly; and Lady Panwin noticed that, like Dorothy, he also objected to the law being put in motion.

When Mr. Clan, expressing himself satisfied, went out of the room, she spoke to Percy. "Come here," said Lady Panwin, grimly, and stepped out on to the lawn.

Hallon, somewhat puzzled, followed, and Dorothy came with him. They followed Lady Panwin across the grass to the nook, wherein the Dancing Faun was placed. There the old lady sat down and proceeded to ask questions, quite ignorant that Mrs. Broll had wakened up at the sound of strange voices and was listening with all her ears.

"Now then," said Lady Panwin, still grim; "both of you tell me the exact truth."

"What do you mean, auntie?" asked Dorothy, startled.

"I mean that you are both keeping something from me. Your disappearance and Mr. Hallon's return coincide too much to be the result of accident. Tell me the truth."

"We have told it, Lady Panwin," said Percy, desperately.

"Indeed!" She rose to her feet. "Then I can safely send for the police to hunt for Sir John Newby."

"No, auntie, don't do that."

"I will not, if you tell me what you are keeping from me. Francis will do anything I tell him, and he is waiting to hear if he should, or should not, communicate with Axleigh."

"What makes you think, Lady Panwin——"

She cut the young man short in a most aggressive way. "I have seen signs and tokens. I need not explain. Also I have an intuition that there is something behind all this."

"But, auntie, if we tell you there is danger to Sir John," said Dorothy, in a piteous tone.

"Ha!" cried Lady Panwin, with deep satisfaction. "I knew that I was right. Since you have admitted so much, you must admit all."

Hallon shrugged his shoulders at Dorothy's slip of the tongue. "If we are frank with you, Lady Panwin, will you solemnly promise to hold your tongue?"

"Yes," she said, shortly, and closed her mouth with a snap. Miss Broll, crouching behind the pedestal, listened attentively, and looked like a wicked old toad curled up amongst the long grass, which grew very luxuriantly on the hither side of the statue.

The promise having been given, Hallon told what had happened to Dorothy and himself, and, indeed, was quite glad to do so. From what the girl had told him he recognised that Lady Panwin would be invaluable in helping to get at the root of the mystery, and, therefore, kept nothing back. When he missed, out a point by chance, Dorothy supplied it, and Lady Panwin's eyes grew larger and larger, and harder and harder, as she listened to the recital of the villainy which had been taking place under the very shadow of the Manor roof.

"Ho!" she said, when Hallon ended, and rubbing her nose. "So Richard is guilty of this murder, after all."

"He denies that he is," said Dorothy.

"Oh, he would deny anything. You don't know

Richard as I do. It is a pity that he should escape scot-free."

"What do you advise, then?" asked Hallon.

"Well," said Lady Panwin, with more than her usual grimness, "if you want me to consult my feelings I should say call in the police and let Richard be blown to Kingdom Come—although it won't be the sort of place he expects it to be."

"But if that is done, Lady Panwin, the Anarchists certainly will harm both Dorothy and myself. I don't mind for myself so much as for Dorothy."

"As if I could live without you," cried the girl, earnestly.

"Well," said Lady Panwin, rubbing her nose again in a vexed way, "it will be best for us all to keep quiet and let Richard pay these cheques. At all events, that will get rid of these Anarchists. Afterwards, we must consider what is best to be done."

"You'll say nothing," said Percy, as she rose.

"No. And I'll go inside and stop Francis from sending for the police, as you suggest. The comedy must be played out. I should be sorry to see it turned into a tragedy, for your sake. But I would see Richard blown up with pleasure"; and she stalked away, looking more gaunt than ever.

Dorothy and Percy embraced. "Everything will be all right soon, my dearest," said the young man, fondly. "I think your aunt's advice is the best. We must let Richard pay for what he has done, and get rid of these terrible people."

"But if Richard is guilty of the murder."

"I do not believe that he is," said Hallon, decidedly; "the tones of his voice were too honest. However, whether he is, or whether he isn't, we cannot help things. And I certainly don't want us, my dear, to be pursued during the honeymoon with bombs."

They talked for a few minutes longer, and were about to saunter away, when a noise in the summer-house near at hand attracted their attention. A head peered out cautiously, and was followed by a disreputable-looking body. The lovers guessed that this was Bezkoﬀ, and when he crawled towards

them cautiously they saw that their guess was correct.

"I have been watching for you," said the Count, softly, and Mrs Broll again pricked up her ears. "Miss Minter told me that you generally sat near this statue, so I waited in the summer-house to get a chance of speaking to you on the quiet. If any one comes say that I am a beggar, that I am trespassing, and turn me out."

"What is it you wish to say?" asked Hallon, anxiously.

"This," Bezkoﬀ looked round. It was beginning to grow dusk, for Percy had taken a considerable time to tell his story. "To-night there is to be a full meeting in the vault. U has been sent to cash one of the smallest cheques in London, to see if Newby is acting quite squarely. If it is honoured, the rest of the cheques—which we will have to cash at intervals, as the amounts are large—will probably be all right. Therefore, to-morrow morning, Newby will be allowed to go. But," ended Bezkoﬀ, with emphasis, "I believe that it is A's intention—"

"A is Jules, is he not?" asked Dorothy, hurriedly.

"Yes. He is the head of the society, the moving spirit of everything, and very daring. He instructed me to see to the train of gun-powder which is laid on the surface of the ground near the tower, and which communicates with the barrels below the vault. I believe that he means to get the society out of the tower, and leave Newby behind, so as to blow him up. Then the cheques cannot be stopped, which they might be if Newby were set free."

"But even if Newby was set free," argued Hallon, "he is still in your power, because of the murder."

"I am beginning to think that he is innocent," said the Count, unexpectedly, "and that Jules cannot prove his supposed guilt, as he declares he can. At all events, it is my firm impression that Jules intends to get rid of Newby by two o'clock in the morning. Newby is in my charge, and I conduct him to and from the vault he is confined in, to the vault where the meeting takes place. I shall probably be told to shut him up just before two o'clock in

the morning. Then Jules will send the members away and fire the train, or it may be that he will instruct me to do it."

"But the explosion will wreck the Manor," cried Dorothy, horrified.

"Well," said Bezkoﬀ, casting a glance at the ruins, "that tower is some little distance away. Still, an explosion on a large scale certainly will do a lot of damage. However, if Jules instructs me to fire the train—and he may, as he has every trust in me—I will not do so. I shall know later if I am appointed to explode the mine. If so, I will let you know, by leaving a note in the summer-house. Come down here about twelve o'clock to-night, and you will know."

"Oh, how dreadful it all is!" cried Dorothy, tearfully. "Canhot we get the police to surround the tower?"

"No, Miss Clair. Jules would then be desperate and fire the mine himself. Better let him assign that task to me. Then there will be a chance of the explosion not taking place."

"But if you disobey Jules' orders you will be killed."

"I must take my chance of that," said Bezkoﬀ, quietly. "I have done so much harm by being connected with this society that I may as well do some good, even at the cost of my life. Only, if I do disobey orders and save the tower, tell Miss Minter that I tried to be a good man for her sake. And, of course," added the Count, quickly, "I may be wrong in thinking that Jules intends to proceed to extremities. However, the fact that I am instructed to look to the train of powder, and see that all is right, points to his intention to blow up the building and Newby with it. Now, good-bye," he ended, abruptly, "and at midnight look for a letter in the summer-house. Then I may be able to tell you exactly what Jules means."

He nodded, and crawled back to the summer-house. Harlow and Miss Clair wanted to ask further questions, but thought that it would be best to leave so dangerous a spot. Jules, who was all eyes, and as stealthy as a cat, might come down. If he saw them

talking to Bezkoﬀ he might guess that the Count intended to betray the society, and then very dreadful things might happen. However, the lovers departed, quite determined to trust to Bezkoﬀ to the end.

The twilight grew darker, but Mrs Broll still crouched in the nest of long grass she had made. With the quick intelligence of a cunning woman, she had taken in every word, and quite understood what was about to happen. Now she was wondering if she could turn her eavesdropping to her own advantage. Wriggling herself round the corner of the pedestal, she kept her two wicked eyes on the opening of the summer-house. Shortly, and when the light was dying rapidly into uncertain darkness, she saw the supposed tramp steal out and take his way through the shrubbery towards the ruins. Mrs Broll rubbed her hands and chuckled. Then she rose and glided on his trail, swiftly and noiselessly, with the unerring intuition of a Redskin.

CHAPTER XXX

MRS BROLL returned to supper in a very happy state of mind, as could be judged from her high spirits. She told the housekeeper that she was certain that Sir John would reappear soon, and then she and Miss Flint would be able to return to London.

"I must confess," minced Mrs Broll, "that I am not accustomed to the quietness of the country. Gaiety is in my blood. Can we not arrange a little entertainment to amuse ourselves this evening? Oh, I think so. Let me see, I shall consult with Julia, who has ideas, even though she is as deaf as a post."

The result of this conversation with Julia was, that Mrs Broll produced her famous gramophone, which she had brought down, and treated the servant to the kind of entertainment she was accustomed to give to her slum people. Jules was highly amused with Mrs Broll's verses when poured out by the machine, and complimented her on the cleverness of her brains. The ex-nurse accepted his compliments in a demure manner, but did not seem to be very anxious to converse with him. From what Mrs Broll had gathered from the overheard conversations she was afraid of the butler. To the rest of the servants he was a meek, silly, foreign person. But Mrs Broll saw in him a dangerous man, who wished to destroy society. Often, when glancing at him furtively during the evening, she wondered if he intended to blow up the tower. In that case the Manor would be damaged, and even if the servants escaped—as they probably would, since their sleeping apartments were far distant from the ruins—the gentry in the front part of the house would be killed. Not that Mrs Broll cared in the least, as she hated Lady Panwin, despised her weak brother, the squire, and detested Dorothy for

her youth and beauty. 'Decidedly' the housekeeper of Sir John Newby was not a 'pleasant person.

While this entertainment was proceeding in the kitchen, Lady Panwin was listening to an account of Bezkoﬀ's revelations from Hallon. The old dame was very much excited, and wanted to send at once for the police. She also saw that if the tower was blown up the front part of the Manor might suffer. But, on reflection, it did not seem wise to inform the local authorities, since Jules, driven to desperation, might explode the mine forthwith.

"He ought to be arrested," said Lady Panwin, flushed and anxious.

"I doubt if Trusk would do that," said Hallon.

"You see, he would not believe our story, and while he was debating its truth, Jules might get to work. We had better trust Bezkoﬀ, my dear lady."

"That is all very well, Mr Hallon. But if this explosion does take place, any one in these rooms would be killed."

"I think not. The tower is some distance away."

"I don't intend to risk it," said Lady Panwin, very decidedly. "I daresay you and Mr Hallon, Dorothy, will go to-night to the summer-house?"

"Yes," answered her niece, promptly, "we must go there about twelve, to learn the latest news. Count Bezkoﬀ will leave à six, as we explained. What do you say to that, aunt?"

"The summer-house is safe. I should advise you both to stop there until the explosion takes place."

"It may never take place."

"Oh, I don't know. Count Bezkoﬀ may not be allowed to fire the mine, and Jules will certainly do it in that case. However, I shall come out to the summer-house also, and I shall bring Francis."

"Will you tell Mr Clair?"

"No, Mr Hallon; I certainly shall not tell him that his property is to be blown up. He is so delicate that he would probably fall down in a fit of some sort. But I shall say that we have received news that Sir John Newby—I must call him so to Francis, as he does not yet know the truth—will return to us at two in the morning, and that we must await him in the summer-house."

"But, my dear lady, Mr Clair will not believe such a wild story."

"Oh yes he will," said Lady Panwin, quickly. "I shall make him. Then, if we are all out there, and the explosion takes place, we shall be safe. The servants cannot possibly get hurt, seeing where they sleep, else I should have them out also."

"Would it not be better to tell father everything?" inquired Dorothy, anxiously.

"No, my dear," said her aunt, decidedly. "Francis would fall ill, and if he did not, he would certainly send for the police. So far as I can see, the police would be absolutely useless. We are all in the hands of Count Bezkoﬀ."

"Then I am certain that we are safe," said Hallon; "at least, the tower is. Bezkoﬀ wishes to stand well with Willy Minter."

"Stale news, Mr Hallon. I saw how the land lay days ago. However, I shall now go and see Francis. What is the time? Ten o'clock. Then at twelve you had better go to the summer-house. Francis and I will come later."

So Lady Panwin departed, and in some way managed to induce her brother to believe that Sir John Newby would reappear with an explanation in the summer-house at twelve o'clock, or perhaps at two. Mr Clair was very much puzzled, as well he might be.

"Of course, Selina, I believe what you say," he remarked, "since I know that you invariably tell the truth. But it seems strange that Sir John communicated with you instead of with me."

"Not at all," said Lady Panwin, calmly. "He did not communicate directly with me or in writing. But Count Bezkoﬀ——"

"That Russian scoundrel!" said Mr Clair, indignantly.

"He is not a scoundrel," rejoined Lady Panwin; "or, if he was, he is trying to become a good man. But I saw him to-day. He has been lurking about this place disguised as a beggar to get an opportunity of talking to me. I chanced upon him, and he says that Sir John is in the power of the Anarchists, but will be released late, and will then come to the summer-house--between twelve and two."

"But why to the summer-house?"

"I can't say. That was all Count Bezkoﬀ declared."

Mr Clair reflected. "Selina," he said at length, "I always thought that Newby knew more about Bezkoﬀ than he chose to confess, since he permitted him to escape when I would have had him arrested. Also, in spite of his denials, I fancy that Newby is connected in some way with these Anarchists in Soho."

"That is quite probable, Francis. Sir John, as you know, was kidnapped, and I dare say they only let him go on certain terms. He probably departed secretly last night to fulfil those terms."

"Then he must have gone to London—to Soho."

Lady Panwin did not correct her brother. "He might have—I cannot say. But, without doubt, they have kept him again a prisoner for the time being. However, Francis, we must wait to-night in the summer-house for him."

"Selina, I object to being in the night-air at two in the morning."

"It is summer-time, and perfectly dry, Francis. However, if you do not choose to come, I can go myself. Dorothy and Mr Halton can keep me company."

"No, Selina," said Mr Clair, with dignity. "I shall go with you. No doubt Newby will explain his extraordinary conduct and his equally extraordinary return at such an hour and in such a place."

"I daresay. But remember one thing, Francis. It will be best not to talk of his return. Don't even tell Mrs Broll."

"She is the last person I should tell. I dislike that woman. And, if you please, do not dictate to me, Selina. I know how to hold my tongue."

Lady Panwin, having achieved her end, went off with a curt nod. Mr Clair would certainly be at the summer-house, and, if the explosion did take place, then every one would be safe. Of course, Newby would not appear, since he would be shut up in the tower. And then the truth would have to be told to Mr Clair. But Lady Panwin, averse as she was to

white lies, told them calmly, since there was nothing else left to do. Bad as Richard Newby was, she would have been glad to save him. But there seemed to be no chance of doing anything. The police were helpless, and everything depended upon Bezkoﬀ.

"You should have followed him to where the train of powder was laid," said Lady Panwin, reproachfully, to Hallon, "and then you could have poured water on the powder."

"Jules might have exploded the powder when below," said Hallon.

"What! and blow himself up also?"

"Anarchists are capable of anything," said Hallon, earnestly. "I really do not see what we can do, save depend upon Bezkoﬀ. If the exploding of the mine is left to him, it will not take place."

"We should have told the police," declared Lady Panwin, who was becoming nervous, "and then a cordon could have been drawn round the tower and the explosion prevented."

"Well," said Hallon, impatiently, "it is too late now."

So he thought, so Lady Panwin thought; but shortly before eleven o'clock Willy Minter arrived, breathless with excitement. She saw Percy and Dorothy in the drawing-room alone, since Mr Clair and his sister were talking in the library.

"I have seen Count Bezkoﬀ," said Willy, who displayed no surprise on beholding Hallon. "He has told me everything. I have sent Billy ten minutes ago, for Inspector Trusk in his motor-car."

"Then everything is lost," said Hallon, despairingly. "My dear girl, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I want to save Count Bezkoﬀ," cried Willy, defiantly. "He gave me a message for you, instead of risking a letter in the summer-house."

"Why didn't you tell us that earlier?"

"I only saw him half-an-hour ago; and after sending Billy off to Axleigh, I hurried on here at once. Listen! Count Bezkoﬀ has been ordered by Jules to fire the train. He does not intend to do that. Before two o'clock he will take Sir John Newby——"

"Richard, you mean, dear," said Dorothy.

"I don't know which it is—and I don't care," said Willy, recklessly. "It is of Count Bezkoﬀ that I am thinking. Well, then, when he takes Sir John Newby to the vault, where he is to be kept until the morning, the society are to disperse, and then the train is to be fired. But Count Bezkoﬀ is going to lead Sir John up the stairs and bring him to the summer-house. In fact, he will set him free. And if he does that, can't you see," cried Willy, despairingly, "the Anarchists will kill him, unless they are captured. So I have told Billy to inform the inspector of everything. Then the police can surround the tower and arrest the Anarchists when they come out."

"But the explosion?"

"There will be no explosion. Jules has left it to Count Bezkoﬀ to fire the train. He will not do that, but will release Sir John Newby instead. Now, was I wrong in sending for the police?"

"No," said Percy, promptly. "What you say quite alters the situation. However, let us go to the summer-house. After all, Bezkoﬀ may have left another letter there."

"He has not," said Willy, following the two out of doors. "He gave the message to me instead."

The night was warm and dry and windless. Occasionally a late remaining nightingale was heard singing, and at intervals there sounded the distant hooting of an owl. It was some time after twelve o'clock, and doubtless Jules, suspecting nothing, had gone to the tower. Just as the young people reached the summer-house, the lights in the library were extinguished. Shortly, the windows of the drawing-room became black squares, and all the house seemed to be deserted. This was done by Lady Panwin, so that the Anarchists should not suspect that any one was on the alert. Shortly, also, Lady Panwin and her brother came across the lawn to the summer-house.

"Jules thinks we have all gone to bed," said Lady Panwin, cautiously. "Now, he will begin his devilries."

Mr Clair was in a state of bewilderment. "I really do not understand what all this is about," he said, irritably. "Why have you put out the lights,

Selina? Willy, why have you come here? Dorothy, why are you not in bed? As to Mr Hallon—"

"Francis"—Lady Panwin laid a strong grip on his arm—"be silent. We are all in great danger. I should have kept this from you if I could have done so, but you may as well know that there is danger."

"What—what—what?" spluttered Mr Clair.

"I can tell you nothing just now," whispered the old dame, impatiently. "If you don't want us to fall into the power of these Anarchists, please hold your tongue."

The vagueness of this threat sobered and terrified Mr Clair, and he very wisely took Lady Panwin's advice. The party moved towards the summer-house, intending to wait within. As Percy approached the door a small figure appeared and uttered a slight scream, then it dashed away amongst the shrubbery.

"We are discovered," said Dorothy, distressed.

"No," said Hallon, quickly, "that was Mrs Broll. I wonder what she was doing here at this time."

"Martha, and out at this hour of the night!" exclaimed Lady Panwin. "Francis, I believe that she is connected with the Anarchists also. A most dangerous woman."

"If she is, she will tell them that we are here," said Willy, alarmed.

"We must take our chance of that," said Lady Panwin, stolidly.

No one was able to understand why Mrs Broll had come to the summer-house at such an hour. Had the housekeeper been present herself she might have explained, or she might not have explained, that she had come to find the letter which Bezkoﬀ had said that he would leave. It was just as well that the Russian had changed his mind at the eleventh hour, and had given a verbal message instead of one in writing. But the nerves of one and all were so stretched with suspense that they did not think further of the little woman's vagaries.

One o'clock struck from the stable clock, and still they waited in the semi-darkness, listening breathlessly and watching the black bulk of Abbot Hutley's Tower. The Anarchists must all have come to the vault by the winding path at the back of the grounds.

as none of them appeared to cross the lawn. There was no sound of the police approaching. It was a most exciting and terrifying hour, and it made every one hold his or her breath, as half-past one struck with a clang. Soon, they would know if the explosion would take place, or if Count Bezkoﬀ would prove true and bring Newby to the summer-house. Willy prayed inwardly for her lover all the time. She was absolutely certain that he would not fail her.

At length, two tall figures were seen crossing the lawn in a rapid and stealthy manner. The next moment Bezkoﬀ was amongst the party in the summer-house, and with him was Newby. Then congratulations ensued. Lady Panwin quite forgot her dislike of Richard, and shook his hands warmly. Mr Clair was at once delighted and perplexed.

"How did you escape?" asked Dorothy.

The Count replied. "I was sent to take Sir John to his vault, but, instead of locking him up, I brought him here. The society are still in the vault."

"I wish you could blow them up," cried Lady Panwin, angrily.

"No, no," said Willy, quickly; "let the police do that. Listen! Billy!"

The cheerful toot-toot-toot of a motor horn was heard. Apparently Billy's machine was sweeping at full speed up the avenue, and the police from Axleigh would be here soon to arrest the villains, who were unsuspectingly plotting in the vault below the tower.

"I am glad that there will be no explosion," said Dorothy, shivering.

Scarcely were the words out of her mouth before the tower seemed to dissolve before their eyes in a furnace of red flame. A moment later came a bellowing sound, and the air was filled with débris.

"On your faces!" shouted Bezkoﬀ, and as if struck by lightning, the whole terrified group of human beings were on the ground.

CHAPTER · XXXI

"Good Heavens! Who can have fired the mine?"

It was Hallon who first staggered to his feet, and stuttered out the question. In the air there was a strong smell of sulphur, and the spot where the tower had stood was veiled in clouds of smoke. The night had grown suddenly darker, and Hallon did not know if those who lay on the ground were dead or alive. Everywhere fragments of stone and debris of all kinds were scattered. The catastrophe had been sudden, unexpected and terrifying, like an earthquake.

Lights began to flash in the windows of the Manor House, and almost immediately a terrified number of servants poured out on to the lawn. Round the corner, from the direction of the avenue, raced Billy Minter, with Inspector Trusk at his heels. The young man carried one of the motor lamps.

"Is every one safe? Is every one— Great heavens, Hallon, you are wounded! There is blood on your face."

"Struck by a stone, I expect," murmured Percy, vaguely, and felt a trifle sick. "Here, Billy, see if the ladies are all right. Luckily, we were not in the house."

As he spoke Count Bezkoﬀ arose, looking wild and ragged in his disguise. Trusk immediately laid his hand upon the Count's arm. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Count Bezkoﬀ," said the Russian, hurriedly, and with an inward qualm.

He did not know how much Willy had told the inspector about him, and thought that he would be arrested forthwith. But Willy had managed better than that, as appeared when Trusk dropped his hand and saluted.

"I know you, sir," he said, respectfully. "Miss Minter sent a message through her brother, that you had been watching these Anarchists on behalf of the Russian Government. We are indebted to you for the capture."

"Capture?" echoed Bezkoﬀ, much relieved at finding that he was not even suspected. "Why, every one of the Anarchists must be blown into atoms by this time. I have reason to believe," he added, cautiously, "that the entire society was below in the vaults. In fact, I know. I pretended to be one of the society in order to denounce it, and so was enabled to rescue Sir John Newby."

"Is he here?" asked Trusk, much interested. "Ah!" as a tall, heavy figure came forward, "is that you, Sir John?"

"Yes. I am here, quite safe," replied the voice of Newby, "thanks to Count Bezkoﬀ. Where are your men, Inspector? We must carry the ladies into the house. They have all fainted, and so has Clair."

"My men will be here soon," said Trusk. "Meanwhile—here," he called to the half-dressed and wholly-terrified servants, "come and help the ladies."

By this time Billy had revived his sister, who struggled to her feet with a bewildered air. She, also, was not hurt. Dorothy was lying by her father, and both were insensible. The squire's arm—as was afterwards discovered—had been rendered useless by a falling stone. But one of the ladies had not fainted, and that was the stout old aunt. Lady Panwin, having escaped quite unhurt, soon recovered her wits—rather scattered by the explosion—and was shortly directing what was to be done.

Now that the worst was over, the servants came forward, and Dorothy was taken into the library along with her father. Willy and Lady Panwin were able to walk, and the men, save for Mr Clair's arm, and the slight cut on Percy's face, were untouched. In a very short space of time the women were put to bed—that is, the girls were—for Lady Panwin resolutely refused to go, and took her brother to his room, where she set to work to revive him. "The police had arrived by this time in various vehicles,

and with the gentlemen and the inspector went to review the scene of the explosion.

When the heavy smoke cloud passed away the moon shone out in the sky, and so radiant was her light that the extent of the damage could easily be seen. The tower was completely wrecked, almost to its deep foundations, and there was a gigantic hole filled with smoking ruins and with human bodies smashed to pieces. The sight was gruesome, to say the least of it. The wall of the Manor House near the tower had also been smashed, and all the windows were shattered. But the force of the explosion had gone upward, so the dwelling-house was less broken up than was expected.

Throughout the night the police worked to get out the bodies of the Anarchists, who had thus been punished by their own wicked villainy. Many villagers came from Beltan to assist, for the explosion had been heard for miles, and the pillar of fire which had shot into the air had been seen by several people. Amongst those who worked so hard were Bezkoﬀ and Halton.

"I say," said Percy, while they were apart for a moment or two, "you are all right, I hope?"

"I am not wounded," said Bezkoﬀ, quickly.

"I don't mean that. But if you are arrested——"

"I shall not be arrested. Did you not hear what the inspector said, Mr Halton? Miss Minter told him that I was a member of the Russian Government, and had been trying to trap these Anarchists for my own country."

"Good!" said Halton, much satisfied. "I should not have liked you to get into trouble, Bezkoﬀ, for you have redeemed the past. But for you, Bezkoﬀ, Richard Newby would have been blown to bits."

"Yes," said Bezkoﬀ, frowning. "I am glad I saved him. But who can have fired the mine?"

"Jules."

"No. If the society was in the vault—and we know that it was—Jules would not have blown it up. He had no reason to do that, since every member was a friend. The whole thirty-four have gone."

"I thought that there were thirty-five members?"

"I am the thirty-fifth," said the Count, quickly.
 "But I have escaped."

"Good!" said Percy again. "Then I hope you will mix no more with these revolutionary affairs."

"Never!" said Bezkoﬀ, fervently. "I shall dedicate the rest of my life to Miss Minter who has saved my character. Now that the Vowel Society has been put out of existence I need not fear to be stabbed, or shot. The past—my past—has been cut off by this explosion, and those I knew with it. Now I am free to begin a new life. That I shall do, in England."

"With Willy Minter?" asked Hallon, smiling.

"Yes," said the Count, flushing through the grime on his handsome face; "that is, if she will have me."

"Oh, she'll have you. But that she loves you she would certainly not have saved you from the hands of the police. But the question still remains. Bezkoﬀ."

"What question?"

"Who fired the mine?"

The Russian looked puzzled. "I really cannot say. Some time after I left you I went to see if the train was in order. It was, and then I came away. Everything was right. And as Jules is dead—as I believe—I can't say who exploded the barrels of gunpowder."

"In what direction was the train of powder laid?" asked Hallon.

"Come this way." Bezkoﬀ led the young man some distance round the gaping hole, and to a leafy thicket near the winding path which led across meadow-lands from the Cuckoo's Grove. "It was here," he said, pointing to a portion of the wall that was still standing. "See, the powder was piled on this spot, and went through that hole down to the barrels in——"

"Hu!lo!" said Hallon, interrupting unexpectedly. "I heard a groan."

He looked round, and so did Bezkoﬀ. Some distance away, and on the other side of the mangled thicket, the two men found the body of Mrs Brill. She was burnt black with powder, and many of her clothes had been torn off. Her face was also covered

with blood, and her leg was broken. But she was now beginning to recover her senses, and the first sign had been the groan, which Hallon had luckily overheard. When Bezkoﬀ dashed some water in her face she groaned again, and then sighed and opened her eyes. From the look in them it was apparent that, although shaken, and perhaps dying, she was in full possession of her senses. She recognised Hallon.

"Is he dead?" she asked, faintly.

"Is who dead?"

"Sir John Newby."

"You mean Richard?"

"No I don't. Richard was murdered, Sir John is alive. I hate him. He intended to turn me away. Through him Richard was murdered. I wanted to blow him up."

"Ah!" cried Bezkoﬀ, "then it was you who fired the mine?"

"Yes," said Mrs Broll, with faint maliciousness.

"I heard all the conversation when I was hiding behind that statue, near the summer-house. Yes, I did. And I followed you to this place, to see how I could set fire to the gunpowder. You said that Sir John would be alone in the tower. I wanted to kill him, because he—he——" Her voice died away.

"You wicked woman!" said Hallon, indignantly.

"You have blown up more than thirty human beings. Sir John, as you call him, is safe."

Mrs Broll, in spite of her faintness and injuries and pain, uttered a shriek which rang wildly through the night air. "He is alive!" she yelled. "Oh! And I have failed, after all! He will—he will——" She could get no further, but fainted right off.

"What does it all mean?" asked Bezkoﬀ, as he assisted Hallon to carry the miserable woman to the Manor.

"It means, I think, that Mrs Broll knows more about these things than we gave her credit for. At all events, she fired the mine."

"And followed me," said the Count, in vexed tones.

"How foolish of me not to be more careful."

"Well," said Percy, drily, "as things have turned out, it is lucky you were not careful. Mrs Broll, by trying to blow up Sir John, has delivered you

from your enemies, and secured you a new lease of life."

The night wore on gradually to day, and when the dawn appeared more people arrived on the scene. The police were stationed everywhere round the grounds, so as to prevent strangers entering. An inquiry was to be held into the cause of the explosion, and to inquire why Anarchists had made the tower their headquarters. But this was in public. In private and in the drawing-room—since part of the library was wrecked—Mr Clair gathered together his friends, and insisted upon an explanation. Even Julia Flint was there, as she had particularly asked to be present when she heard that Sir John had come to life again. And there she sat, devouring the man she loved with all her eyes.

Clair first addressed himself to Newby. "I should like to know, Sir John——" he began, and got no further.

"That man," said Lady Panwin in hard tones, "is Richard Newby."

"Selina; can't I believe, in my own eyes?"

"No!" snapped his sister. "That is Richard, who murdered John, and, as I was always fond of John, I want to see Richard hanged."

Mr Clair, perfectly aghast at this accusation, raised his hand to enforce silence and speak. But Newby prevented him.

"Allow me to make the explanation," he said, quietly. "It will throw light on many things that now are dark. I am not Richard Newby, although in a measure, I pretended to be. My name is John."

"No," said Lady Panwin, "you have many of John's pleasant manners, but also I can see several of Richard's nasty tricks."

"My manners are my own, Lady Panwin," retorted the man, heatedly, "and I assumed some tricks of Richard for reasons of my own."

"I should like to hear those reasons, John."

"Then you admit, that I am John?"

"I'll hear your reasons first," said Lady Panwin, doubtfully. "You are certainly more like the John Newby I knew. Go on."

The rest of the company listened breathlessly while

Newby spoke. He raised his voice gradually, as he grew heated with his narrative, but on the whole, spoke very quietly.

"You know much of my story already," he declared; "how I sent Richard to Russia, and how I followed him to the Cuckoo's Grove. When I arrived there, shortly after seven, I discovered his dead body by the stile. Jules arrived, and from what he said I saw that he knew Richard. Also, I saw that he mistook me for my brother. He thought that I had killed him, and addressing me as Richard, he insisted that I should pretend to be myself in order to give money to his society. Otherwise, he assured me he would accuse me of murder. I had to yield, since I caught sight of the knife near the body and recognised it as the one which had been in my library. It was known that I was on bad terms with Richard, so I saw in a flash that a case could be made up against me. Also, Jules declared that he had seen me strike the blow, which was a falsehood. However, I fell into his humour, and, pretending to be Richard, I went, first to the vault, to carry there along with Jules the body of my miserable brother, and afterwards to the Soho house, so as to give colour to the kidnapping story. When the time was ripe I returned to my home. But Jules and the society always thought that I was Richard masquerading as Sir John. To make them think so—as much of my safety lay in their mistake—I pretended to affect several of Richard's mannerisms, which you, Lady Panwin, saw. It was very clever of you to think that I was Richard. But you were not so clever as Martha Broll. She recognised me at once."

"Then why did she say that you were Richard?"

"I cannot tell you. No doubt, when she is well enough, she will explain. However, you can guess now why I admitted that Amy Sanding was my wife. She was sent here by the Anarchists——"

"No," interrupted Bezkoft at this moment, "I sent her to you, for I really believed you to be Richard. I did so to stop the marriage between yourself and Miss Clair, as Miss Minter asked me to do so. I guessed that, as you were masquerading as Sir John—for I thought that you were—you would

not be able to deny that Miss Sanding had married you."

"She did not marry me," said Sir John, very drily. "She was the deserted wife of my brother Richard. When I took her away, I made her confess that she knew who I really was. I arranged to pay her an income, so she is quite prepared to state that I am not her husband. Your device was a very ingenious one, Count Bezkoﬀ. But it has failed, and I am free. With regard to the Anarchists, I had to go to the meeting, and sign the cheques to save myself and Dorothy and Hallon. Fortunately, only one has been presented to the amount of two thousand pounds, and that money has been blown into the air along with the rest of the cheques to the amount of one million, which were in Jules's possession. I am happy to pay two thousand for my freedom. And I quite forgive you, Count Bezkoﬀ, for giving me Miss Sanding as my wife, seeing that I owe my life to you."

He paused and wiped his face, for the day was very hot.

"But who killed Richard?" asked Mr Clair, anxiously. "You will not be safe until that is cleared up."

"No one can accuse me," said Sir John, quietly. "Jules and his gang are dead. I am quite innocent."

All this time, Julia had sat with her eyes fixed on Sir John. She frequently asked what he was saying, and Willy, who knew the deaf and dumb language, explained to her. When she had heard the last remark of the millionaire she rose.

"I can prove that Sir John is innocent," she said, in her flat voice. "Wait!"

She went out of the door, and re-appeared so quickly with the gramophone that it could be guessed she had brought it before and into the hall. Placing this on the table she produced a disc from her pocket and put it in order. Then she set the machine going. All watched her, much astonished and interested, wondering what she meant. But the astonishment became greater when the s' rill voice of Mrs Broﬀ was heard to proceed from the machine. She was speaking to a man who had a deep voice, and replied to

her at intervals. The broken conversation ran as follows:

"Don't go to Russia," said Mrs Broll, "until you find out who wrote the letter. Dress as John and keep the appointment. If you can silence this person, whoever it is, all the better."

"And if I don't?" asked a man's voice, at the sound of which Sir John Newby started.

"That is Richard's voice," cried Newby, then held his breath. But part of the record had been lost by his speaking.

"..... put you in prison. Better that John should die."

"I don't want to kill John," said Richard's voice.

"Then I shall," retorted the voice of Mrs Broll.

Newby rose hurriedly, and interrupted the machine. "Do you mean to say that Mrs Broll killed my brother?" he asked Julia, rapidly, in the deaf-and-dumb language.

"Yes," she said, unemotionally, "in mistake for you."

The others stopped the two speaking, and the machine went on to the end of the conversation. Then Julia produced another disc, and that related sufficient to shew that Mrs Broll, in conversation with Richard, had announced her intention of beguiling Sir John to the Cuckoo's Grove by means of the anonymous letter, and there killing him with the knife taken from the library. She hoped to put the blame on the Anarchists. "As to the knife," Mrs Broll's voice explained from the machine to Richard, "Count Bezkoft has been often in the library. We'll say that he took the knife and killed——" Here the record broke off.

CHAPTER XXXII

NOW that the truth had become known in so wonderful a manner, Mrs Broll should certainly have been hanged for the murder of Richard Newby. But she escaped the justice of man—in other words, she never recovered from the effects of the explosion, which she herself had caused. Her meagre body was much more shattered than Hallou and Bezkoſ had thought. After lingering for two days in great agony she passed away, and it was only during the last hour of her miserable life, when she knew that she could not live, that she confessed the truth. Trusk himself, who had been informed of the evidence of the gramophone, took down her confession, and she signed the same in his presence. It quite exonerated Sir John.

To make a précis of the document, it appeared that Mrs Broll had always hated Sir John as much as she loved Richard, and had frequently connived at the younger twin's rascalities, when he swindled his generous elder brother, which he did frequently. When Sir John found out about the forgeries, he also learnt that Mrs Broll was encouraging Richard, and, therefore, sent his twin to Russia, and informed Mrs Broll that he would dismiss her with a pension.

The little woman hated the idea of being sent into exile in the country, and also wanted to save Richard. The letter written by Jules, hinting at further rascalities on Richard's part, was intercepted by that gentleman, and, on Mrs Broll's advice, he disguised himself as Sir John and went down to the country. Mrs Broll then told Sir John, and induced him to go down to the Cuckoo's Cove, in order—as she put it—to save Richard. It was understood between the nurse and the younger twin that Sir John was to be

murdered, and then the blame was to be put on to Count Bezkoﬀ, or on to the Anarchists. Mrs Broll had been the first to guess that the letter came from the Anarchists, and that they threatened to blacken Richard's character still more to his brother. By Richard's stopping the letter he was enabled to meet Jules as his brother, and then intended to make terms. Sir John, when inveigled to the spot, was to be murdered, and Richard was to step into his shoes. That also accounted for the disguise which Richard assumed. When Sir John was dead, Richard was to go back for the portmanteau to the Beltan Station, and then go on as a guest to the Manor. His strong resemblance to his twin, and his knowledge of John's mannerisms, would enable him to play the part, socially. As to the business, Richard was so accomplished a forger that he could easily assume his brother's handwriting and signature. Finally, his knowledge of the business was as complete as that of Sir John's, because, as his brother's secretary, he knew nearly everything. When the murder had taken place, and Count Bezkoﬀ or some Anarchist was hanged for the crime, then Mrs Broll and the false Sir John hoped to have everything their own wicked way.

Unfortunately for the success of this clever plan, things did not happen exactly as had been arranged. Mrs Broll took an early train and got out at Axleigh, the next station to Beltan. Then she walked to the Cuckoo's Grove along the road, and concealed herself in the bushes near the stile, with the red-banded knife, which she had taken from the library of the Camden Hill house. It was arranged between herself and Richard that Sir John should be allowed to come along first, and then, when he had been killed by Mrs Broll, she would leave the knife as evidence against Bezkoﬀ, and return to town from the Axleigh Station. But it so happened by chance, or by the design of Providence, that Richard arrived on the spot before his brother. While he was leaping over the stile Mrs Broll, deceived by the dress and by the somewhat dim light, came stealthily behind and drove her knife into his back. Then she dropped the weapon and fled. No one apparently noticed the little dusty

woman dressed in black—for Mrs Broll confessed that she had abandoned her gaudy frocks on this expedition—and the murderess was thus enabled to sneak into the Axleigh train and get back to town. She excused her absence when she returned to Camden Hill, by telling Julia that she had been to the slums. Then, when she was safe, Mrs. Broll sat down to wait for Richard.

When Sir John appeared she was horror-struck to find that she had killed her favourite, and immediately wondered if she could not put the blame of the death on Sir John, whom she hated the more for having been the unconscious cause of Richard's death. But she was not able to manage anything, until she overheard the conversation which Bezkoﬀ had with Dorothy and her lover. Then Mrs. Broll, thinking that Sir John was imprisoned in the tower, and that the Anarchists had gone, fired the mine. Afterwards she discovered that again the Cosmic Powers had intervened on behalf of her victim. She destroyed the Anarchists, but left Sir John alive.

As to the gramophone record. Julia, being in love with Sir John, and knowing that Mrs Broll hated him, always kept a watch on the nurse. The records were constantly being taken, and even when Richard entered the room to converse with Mrs Broll, the nurse never thought—through sheer carelessness, it would seem—of stopping the machine. Consequently, in the middle of a song, or a fragment of verse, the record would take down the dialogue between Mrs Broll and Richard. They paid no attention to Julia, as they deemed she was deaf, as she certainly was, but the mindless machine took down their guilty confidences. Two or three times Mrs Broll removed the disc that had been working while Richard talked; but Julia—later on—was prepared for this, and when Mrs Broll was dismissing Richard at the door the girl would take away an inscribed disc and substitute another. Mrs Broll never knew the difference, and thus Julia had been able to acquire evidence of the woman's guilt.

Of course, Miss Flint had never anticipated murder. She simply knew that the nurse and Richard hated the man she loved, and made the gramophone take down

their words, so that she could find out what they were talking about. A friend of hers, whom she had sworn to secrecy, heard the machine going with the stolen discs, and repeated the conversations to Julia. But Miss Flint held her tongue, until such time as Sir John should be accused of murdering his brother, since she guessed that Mrs Broll intended to make some such accusation. Had the crime been carried out as Mrs Broll intended, Count Bezkoﬀ would have been accused on the evidence of the knife. But Rickard being dead, his brother could be hanged for the murder. Mrs Broll never did accuse Sir John, as she apparently was keeping her secret until such time as he should force her to go to the country. Then, without doubt, she would have blackmailed him. But Julia, when she heard what was said in the Manor House library, and when she knew that Mrs Broll was dying, produced the discs, with the result which has been reported.

"That woman should have been hanged!" observed Dorothy to her lover, a month later, when they sat in their favourite corner.

"Well, she's dead," replied Percy, "so there's no more to be said."

But Dorothy did not agree with him. Now that the storm was over and the calm had come, she wished to talk about what they had undergone. The day was lovely, although there was a hint of winter in the air. In the house, Lady Panwitz was talking to Sir John Newby, to whom she had become quite reconciled, since she had found that he was really himself and not his scamp of a brother. Mr Clair, as usual, was in his restored library, fastening on the wall an iron gag which had been found in the ruins. Without doubt it was the pear used to gag Hallon, and which Jules, with great coolness, had stolen from the library. Now it was replaced by the delighted Mr Clair. And it may be mentioned that Willy Minter was expected to afternoon tea along with her brother and Count Bezkoﬀ, now a very frequent visitor to the cottage.

"We must talk over things," said Dorothy, slipping her arm within that of Percy's, "and then we'll never mention the subject again."

"What do you wish to say?" he asked, smiling, for Dorothy looked prettier than ever, and next month would surely make a very charming bride.

"Well, then," said Dorothy, "it was very kind of Sir John to give me up, and to promise to assist you in your business."

"It was," assented Hallon. "Still, as you did not love him, and certainly—correct me if I am wrong—love me, he did not make so very great a sacrifice."

Dorothy pinched him. "Of course I love you," she pouted. "But I love Sir John also, in a way. And look how good he has been to Count Bezkoﬀ. Willy says that the Czar intends to reinstate him in his father's property, and that the high official who caused all the trouble will be sent to Siberia."

"And quite right too," said Perey. "The high official was a beast. I suppose that when Bezkoﬀ is restored to his estates in Moscow, Willy Blinter will become the Countess Bezkoﬀ?"

"Of course. Why, she calls him Ivan."

"With a few adjectives, I presume. Lucky Ivan! What does Billy say to the prospect of losing his sister?"

"Oh, he is going to Russia also."

"Humph! I hope he won't be blown up."

Dorothy looked at the remaining ruins of the tower with great horror.

"Don't talk of such things," she said. "My head is yet ringing with that terrible explosion."

"Well, it did a lot of good," said Hallon, coolly.

"In the first place, it polished off those Anarchists who would have worried Bezkoﬀ. In the second, it smashed up Mrs Broll, who pulled the temple down on her own head like a female Samson; and in the third, it laid bare the buried treasure of Abbot Hurley. By the way, how is that business going?"

"Father has sent everything to London to the Crown officials."

"What! All the crosses and goblets, and pyxes, and altar furniture? I think that there must be thousands of pounds worth all that gold and those many jewels. I wonder Jules didn't come across the treasure when he was arranging his barons of gold."

powder under the Devil's Ace vault, like another Guy Fawkes."

"But the treasure was buried in the earth, Percy. Only the explosion tore up the ground and revealed it. Father will get a good deal of money for it from the Government, although I believe it is Crown property, you know."

"Ah! Sir John arranged that also. He is a good friend to every one."

Dorothy nodded, and then rose. "And now come to the ruins," she said, smiling. "I have something to show you."

"What is it?"

As they sauntered towards the ruins of the tower Dorothy explained: "Do you remember the Devil's Ace?"

"Oh, heavens!" said Hallon, with a shudder. "Don't talk of that beastly thing. It caused all the trouble."

"No it didn't, because it was never turned. And after all, Julia Flint, with her gramophone, put an end to the trouble."

"I think Mrs. Broll's confession did that. However, I am glad that Sir John shewed his gratitude to Julia by making her independent."

"Ah, poor girl! She would rather have married him."

"I daresay; but she could scarcely expect Sir John's gratitude to carry him that far. I don't believe that he will ever marry, since he has lost you, Dorothy"—he stopped and took her hands—he is rich and I am poor. Why do you marry me?"

"Because I love you. And you will be rich soon. Why, Sir John will put lots of business in your way. You know what a fancy he has taken to you."

"He is very magnanimous," sighed Hallon again walking towards the ruins, "considering what a jewel I have taken from him. Oh, here come Bezloff and Willy. How happy they look."

It was indeed the Russian and Miss Minter who approached. They looked very handsome and very happy.

"When do you go back to Russia?" asked Dorothy, joyfully, when greetings were exchanged.

"Not for some time," said Willy. "In fact, I think Ivan and I will live for the most part in England; and down here, Dolly, where you and Percy can live also."

"We can form a community," said Bezkoﬀ. "But I have a great deal to be thankful for. I am happy now, and I can act like an 'honourable gentleman.'"

"Ivan, I won't have you speak any more of the past," said Willy.

Bezkoﬀ kissed her hand. "You are an angel."

"Where is Billy?" asked Hallon, idly.

"He is coming up shortly. Where are you going now?"

"Dorothy has found something," said Percy.

Miss Clark nodded, and, walking towards the thicket near the winding path, stooped down and picked something off the grass.

"Look!" It was a very antique looking card, stained with rain and blackened with gunpowder.

"The Devil's Ace!" cried Willy. "Oh! fancy that frail thing escaping the explosion."

"Drop it, Dolly," said Percy, uneasily. "I wish you had never found it."

"No," said Dorothy, holding it up. "I believe the curse has been removed, so I am about to turn it, and wish."

"No! No!"

At this moment Lady Panwin was seen issuing from the house with Sir John. They espied the young people and came towards them. Hallon tried to take the Ace from Dorothy.

"Lady Panwin," he cried, "stop Dorothy from tempting Fate again."

"The Ace of Abbot Hurley!" said Lady Panwin, astonished.

"Of Amyas Clark, you mean. He won the estates with that card."

"Curious that it should escape being blown to blows," said Newby.

"I am going to tempt Fate," said Dorothy; and, before anyone could stop her, she solemnly turned the card. "I wish wealth, health and happiness, and honour for us all."

She paused and laughed.

